RICARDO G. CURCI

THE BATS OF BRAZIL

For the aunts
Hilda and Elsa who never forgot me
Rosa, whom I never met and lost so much
Perla, whom I knew so little and regret so much.

They are all memories, the purest crystal of affection.

“It had united with despair,
the most faithful of wives .”
“They are coming,
with the flapping of her black clothes.”

VICENTE BLASCO IBAÑEZ

Brothers who fight often love each other

1

They had been waiting for the boat that usually made the round trip from Buenos Aires to the north, but after a week, a fishing boat docked at the dilapidated pier. Its two crew members, a boy and an old man, got off, and without even looking at the couple who stood waiting with their boots almost buried in the mud of the shore, they exchanged mocking smiles.
"Are you passengers on the 'Juan Manuel'?" the oldest man asked.
He was slightly surprised to hear his name. He had an arm around his wife's shoulders, who , like every morning since they had left the village, was immersed in a cold and impenetrable gloom, meticulously revealed in each of her slow gestures, studied and analyzed almost by those clear eyes of Scandinavian descent.
-Yes- replied Manuel Menéndez Iribarne, sensing that the similarity between the ship that was to take them for part of the return trip to Spain and his own name, contrary to what was expected, was not a good omen.
"It ran aground two weeks ago many kilometers downstream. They're repairing it." The old man had taken off his cap and was beginning to remove his wet clothes. Naked, he jumped into the river, while the boy continued unloading the full nets.
The couple looked at each other in silence. Since leaving the village, they had exchanged few words. Yet they both felt José's presence still too close: she, like an iron wall preventing her from seeing and escaping; he, like an aboriginal god constantly threatening him. But these were sensations each

assumed the other had, hints their eyes suggested, knowing they were being watched.
From six o'clock in the morning of each of the last few days, they stood side by side, at first without touching, then she clung to his arm, and after the third day, he was able to place his right arm around her shoulders, which she allowed, trembling at first, then more serene. Whether they were closer, neither of them could know, since these were only physical tremors as manifestations of the soul, and they felt they had nothing to do with each other. Their souls were like two Etruscan figures whipped by Mexican carnivals, bewildering events and irresolvable conflicts, earthly apotheoses of despair.
And all their thoughts were drawn to one center, precisely the one place they needed to avoid. That's why they turned to the ship and the river, why they placed their hope in the still distant sea, and in their homeland of Cádiz as a Paradise regained.
The focus was on her body, her belly serene yet trembling, because everything she ate she expelled again through her mouth. She insisted on remaining there until late afternoon, exposed to the cold breeze, to the possible blows from the fishermen who passed by, looking at her with resentment and anger because she was standing right on the path of the small, half-ruined pier.
After a week, the news disappointed them even more than they already were, but at least they now knew what to expect regarding the waiting time.
"And when do you think you'll be able to cross?" Manuel asked, moving closer to the shore so the old man could hear him from the water. The other man shrugged, and after a while, coming out to put his clothes back on, which had quickly dried in the sun, he said:
“I don’t know, boss, what can I tell you? We passed by the place where it ran aground yesterday, and that’s what they told me. It’s right up on poles next to the shore, and one or two brutish Indians are repairing the keel.”
The old man smiled because the boy had started laughing uproariously when he heard him. “Those guys don’t know anything, and the captain is probably in town, completely drunk.” The boy pushed him and whispered something in his ear ; the old man couldn’t stop laughing anymore. “You

know , sir…” and he glanced sideways, “…they say that over there, chicha and women aren’t easy to give up.”
But they paid no attention, fighting amongst themselves and hauling away all their catch in a cart pulled by a scrawny, old bay horse. It took great effort for the animal to free its wheels from the mud in which they had sunk while loading. They whipped and patted it, insulted and stroked it, until they slowly emerged along the path hidden among the trees.
Manuel and Altea sat down on a fallen log. The roar of the current had grown louder after midday. The water flowed murky, with debris and a muddy color. This wasn't new to them; since their arrival several years earlier, they knew it was storm season and the rivers flowing down from Brazil were much stronger. The Iguazu Falls, they'd been told, increased their force and swept away trees and even entire small villages and ports along their banks. They had also seen many corpses of men and animals after floods.
“There’s no other choice but to wait,” he said, in a very low voice, as if speaking to the river, but he knew she had a very sensitive ear. So many times before, he had wanted to unleash his own anger in timid murmurs, but he refrained from doing so lest she hear. His own timidity always irritated him, that kind of cowardice that was more of an internalized repression, learned, or perhaps inherited. That shame that made him proud because it contributed to his distinction, building brick by brick that ivory tower in which he liked to take refuge.
"Couldn't you find out if someone could rent us a boat, or take us somewhere? I can't stand this place anymore," she said.
It wasn't even a small village, but a spot where a few fishermen anchored to unload their catch for their voyage to other shores, returning a few days later to collect it. It was rare for anyone who wasn't indigenous to live nearby. A couple looked after the dock and lived in a shack. During the day they sometimes shared it, but they preferred to wait for the boat on the shore, because they couldn't stand the presence of the man and woman worn down by the jungle and the river. He walked with a limp from an old fracture in his leg; he had fallen from a tree trying to hunt a monkey, he said, but the woman had laughed while proudly showing off the absence of her right hand: it had been amputated because of a yararáa snake bite. They told them all this that very night, when they thought they sensed the

greatest unease among their Spanish guests. They had told them that they too were from the Iberian Peninsula, but both couples despised each other. The shack was dark. Five years earlier, the provincial government had demanded payment to install electricity, and they paid with the proceeds from several months of fishing.

"When the ship arrived with the poles, there was a storm in Corrientes. The flash flood swept everything away, and this is what it is, as you see it. We never even had more than two houses. This is the only one left." The man's voice was slow, but there was a hint of humor in his tone. The woman, on the other hand, glared at Altea with hatred, consumed by a kind of envy for the dark dress Altea wore, which was nevertheless simple and suited to her work as a teacher, a farmer on the land next to the school, a delivery driver from the village, or a first-aid nurse. Altea had been all of those things, even a wife who, although she couldn't boast of being passionate or affectionate, was exactly the mirror image of her husband, at least in terms of her reactions. Manuel's introversion was matched by her coldness. Neither sought in the other what the other couldn't offer. That is why they loved each other, perhaps, as an intellectual understanding that had become a kind of love, which they could never, however, have classified. And on the same night they were told about the breakdown of the “Juan Manuel”, the other Manuel, the one from that islet on the mainland, or on muddy and slippery land pushed by the tangle of trees in the jungle, said in a loud and clear voice, recognizing in his voice an apocryphal pride:

-My wife is pregnant.

The pair of caregivers looked up, each puzzled. At first they hadn't understood; they didn't use that word, but they had heard it.

"Ah," he said, looking at his wife with a mocking smile. "She's pregnant. She doesn't understand, excuse me, she's illiterate."

The woman stood up, grabbed a frying pan, and hit the man on the head. It was all unintentional, like a children's game they repeated many times. He laughed as he tried to defend himself. She chased him around the cramped shack until she knocked him to the ground, still laughing. Meanwhile, she hurled insults at him in Guarani and Spanish, mixing in Portuguese terms; both were drunk. Altea and Manuel looked at each other, resigned to leaving and spending the night in the open. They sat on the ground, their backs against a fallen tree trunk. Late into the night, the moans of the

caretakers making love could be heard, punctuated by blows and insults. Then, around two or three in the morning, absolute silence fell from the shack. Only the murmur of the river and the constant, mournful, and smooth hooting of owls could be heard, like dark velvet that could be touched in the air.
Manuel and Altea fell asleep when it was almost dawn, she with her head resting on her husband's shoulder, he closing his eyes when he smelled on his wife's dress the aroma of sweat and tiredness, the perfume of life and death, tangible and unmistakable, sprouting from her like a fruit full of acrid moisture.

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The next day, they woke up late. Since they were lying with their backs to the dock, the little activity that morning hadn't managed to rouse them. Two barges, some shouts, the barking of dogs going down to the beach and back up before the fishing boat set sail again. A dog was sniffing at Manuel's feet when he woke up; he was tall and thin, almost bald and covered in scars. When the dog saw him wake up, it raised its long snout, looked at him suspiciously, and then came a little closer.
"Get out!" Manuel said. The dog growled, bared its teeth, but crouched down as if playing a game. He knew these behaviors. Back in Cádiz, the Menéndez Iribarne family owned vast fields that they leased out, and others they kept for their own use. Hunting forests, fields for raising woolly cattle, horses, or poultry. The wool they sold was of the highest quality, as were their pheasants, or so it was said throughout the province. Manuel had dedicated himself to breeding hunting dogs, and this one he now faced was of that breed. A mixed breed, no doubt, but one that still retained a certain distinction in its posture, and above all in its demeanor: a veiled threat and an austere defense. This strange mix could only be conceived in a hunting animal, intelligent, well-trained, in a balance that a man could never achieve. A man would be ruled by emotion or reason, without knowing how to find the right balance. A dog doesn't make mistakes. It can be cruel, if its owner is cruel.

A man called to the animal from the river. He didn't understand the name; it was in Guarani, perhaps. The dog listened, its whole body tense, its head turned toward the call, but, to Manuel's astonishment, the dog didn't run. Then Altea woke up and saw the animal looking at her, and then sitting down between them, without opening its mouth or wagging its tail. It remained as still as a statue. Altea sat up a little; her body ached, but with her face as stony as Scandinavian ice, devoid of anger or rage, embodying all the kindness an unblemished face can express, she reached out to the dog and stroked its head.

The animal was tall, with long legs, and even sitting down it was taller than they were, still almost lying next to the tree trunk. It was like a god who had approached them to be worshipped by his faithful, but as submissive as a servant, because after all, Manuel told himself, that was precisely what he had learned the Christian god was like. How many times he had argued with his brother José about this. The Menéndez Iribarne family had an ancient history in the practice of Catholicism. They had their own seats in several cathedrals in Spain, pews and kneelers that bore their name as ancient donations. The convents of Cádiz offered an annual mass in honor of the esteemed family, which each year gave large sums of its fortune to charitable causes. The heraldic shield contained a host, among other symbols, as a sign that each generation had given one of its members to the Church.

But there weren't many left, only the two brothers, José and Manuel Menéndez Iribarne. This was a common topic of conversation within the family during their childhood and adolescence. There was also talk of Manuel's ecclesiastical vocation; he was always seen as timid and thoughtful, as if some innate harmony destined him for the cloister. José, however, was violent, irascible, and passionate. Manuel didn't like to leave the house, and José rarely returned at night when he went out with friends and women.

When they were almost adults, José chose a career as a merchant marine, and then Manuel was considered the only likely candidate for the Church. But his parents were worried about the family's financial situation. José avoided marriage, and if he had children, he would have fathered them anywhere and with any unknown woman; he couldn't be trusted in that

regard. So they asked Manuel what his vocation was, because he had never confirmed or denied that he liked to dedicate his life to God.
“I want to get married,” he replied, and both his mother and father stared at him in astonishment. He was eighteen years old and had fallen in love. They asked him with whom. He said with the daughter of a Danish family. His parents felt uneasy. They had reached a point where the future of the inheritance might fall into the hands of the Church, which they had tried to prevent with this kind of generational payment. Now it would be squandered by José, or given away abroad by Manuel. His father, Agustín Menéndez, accused his son of being inconsiderate and childish. He was still a boy, and probably a virgin, and he came to impose conditions on his parents with utter shamelessness. José wasn't there, because he had left six months earlier with the Spanish navy for a long circumnavigation of Africa, so Manuel received all the reproaches with a strange resignation for his age. His mother tried to calm her husband, but he paced back and forth across the dining room where the three of them had sat down to talk.
A maid occasionally peeked out from the door leading to the kitchen, then closed it again at the sound of old Agustín's shouts. "If she were a woman from Cádiz," the father said, in yet another attempt to convince himself that his son Manuel was as stubborn and closed-minded as a stone. But it wasn't stupidity, he knew that well; it was a strange kind of innate maturity. His son had been born old, and he observed everything with an absolute sense of tranquility.
Manuel watched as his father glared at him in fury, and his mother wouldn't even look at him because she didn't understand. She had only ever loved José, and in him, that love had run out.
“Her name is Altea, and she just graduated as a teacher. We’ll get married and go to America. Maybe we’ll teach the indigenous people, I’ll also give catechism classes, and we’ll live off trade in the coastal area.”
The old man burst out laughing and had to sit down. He continued laughing while his son watched him from across the table. An antique vase had already fallen to the floor at the start of the argument, so nothing stood between them.
“Dreams,” the old man said, as if it were a sad word. He looked at his wife, who was sitting to one side, silent, almost as if she were a decorative vase. “One son turned out to be a wild child, and the other a dreamer of clouds.”

That was the last conversation Manuel remembered with his father. Life at home continued as usual, until he learned that Agustín Menéndez had begun selling his fields and properties. Lawyers came and went from the house, there were arguments in the old man's study, and even the family doctor came several times to treat his mother. The brothers had someone from whom they could inherit their stubbornness. Old Agustín wouldn't back down: he would sell everything while he was still alive rather than die knowing that his fortune would be stolen from his children through their inherent stupidity. At least the prestige, the glory of the family, and its impeccable history would remain. And, as a fitting end to such lineage, the dissolution of the aristocratic family would remain a mystery that everyone would speak of with respect, because in the end, that's all that matters in any epitaph.

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The fishing boat had left, but the dog had stayed. Manuel got up and helped Altea. She shook the dried mud from her skirt and went to the river to wash her face. The dog watched her, and then Manuel asked:
- What shall we call it?
“I’ll leave that to you, the one who adopts other people’s children,” she replied, now lucid, walking listlessly along the gentle slope of the beach. Then she stopped, and a look of horror, which he had practically never seen in her, because it rarely appeared so express and clear on her face, formed under the clear, hermetic, and soulless morning light, a chaotic light trying to order itself after being born from darkness. That look wasn’t so much because of what she had said, but because of what she felt behind those words, and since there was no longer any need to remain silent, she said, emphasizing and pronouncing the words very quietly, almost as if exorcising them:
-I wish he would die.
She squatted down, opening her legs, her skirt forming a bridge of fabric between them. The dog approached and rested its head there. Altea was crying silently, and she stroked it.

Manuel placed a hand on Altea's head, on her extremely light hair, tied in a messy bun at the nape of her neck. Then they set off for the shack. They assumed the others were still asleep, but the door was open, the few pieces of furniture overturned, and the dirt floor stained with dark patches. They thought it was spilled wine, until they found the man's body under the tabletop. Manuel pushed it open and bent down; the man's head was crushed, and fragments of brain mattered, sprouting like spores from between the shards of his skull. Altea covered her mouth, and Manuel covered the body with a dirty sheet. Beside him, he found the iron frying pan, full of dried blood.

They went back outside, searching around, but the woman had most likely fled with one of the fishermen who had passed by that morning.

"They left a dog and took a woman," she said, having recovered from her bitterness, which had transformed into a saving sarcasm. Manuel smiled.

-I think we came out ahead. I think we should bury him first; it's the most Christian thing I can think of.

Altea nodded. Manuel wrapped the body in the sheet, and together they dragged it out. The beach was deserted; it was past midday, and no boats would approach until late afternoon. They looked around for a suitable place to bury it and decided that among the trees was best. They didn't know what would happen with the authorities if someone found the body, and in any case, they wouldn't hide the truth. Manuel went back to the cabin to get a shovel. Altea waited for him among the tall trees, a few meters from the entrance. The place was cool, the ground leguminous and slippery, except where the vines formed a carpet they tripped over. He told his wife it was best not to go any further because of the snakes, but he knew she wouldn't listen; somehow, she was waiting for some sign from providence that would turn out to be fatal. Altea was not very religious, and the only certainty he had was in uncertain forces, which he sensed were more terrible than the already terrible God of the Catholics.

The sun's rays pierced the branches at an angle; some trunks spoke of a hundred or two hundred years of life. The light illuminated her as she walked behind the body he was dragging. The sheet continued to soak with blood, and the burden grew heavier with each passing moment. Sometimes it snagged on protruding roots, other times on vines. Birds screeched at the

intruders. They crossed a path where the old man and the boy had disappeared with the cart, the scrawny horse, and their load of fish.
Manuel sighed wearily and stood up, rubbing his waist.
-This is not a suitable place either.
"Why?" she asked. "Are we hiding?"
-No, but given the situation, we would be considered suspects, and returning to our homeland will be almost impossible for some time.
She let out a weary snort.
"That's the lesson they've instilled in you, always suspicion and guilt, even when no one accuses you." Altea's hands were clasped in front of her waist, moving them, rubbing them together. "Let's stay here, right by the road. It surely leads to some small town, and someone will see it. They'll suspect the woman, for sure; maybe they'll look for her, maybe not. We'll report it to the first authority we find."
Manuel grabbed the shovel and began to dig, already tired; he wasn't a strong man. Slender, his arms and legs had muscles proportionate to his average height. That was what had attracted her to his body, that strange beauty in a man, the brown hair on his torso, his tanned skin. She looked at him as if she wanted to help him and asked how she could. Without waiting for a refusal, she looked for branches and palm fronds, and with both, she began to remove the earth he was digging. The dog hadn't followed them to the shack; it seemed afraid to get close, surely it had been chased away with blows or kicks on its previous visits. But suddenly they saw it appear, and it began to scrape the earth at the edge of the pit that was slowly forming. They looked at each other and couldn't help but laugh despite the resentment and bitterness, despite the anger and sorrow that had long shaped the fatalism of their lives.
When the grave was as deep as Manuel was tall, he climbed out, and together they dragged the body in. The dog sniffed the sheet, excited, barking and biting at it. He must have remembered. At the edge, they lowered the wrapped corpse into the grave. They returned the earth, and while he compacted the surface and covered it with branches and dry leaves, she set about making a cross. She handed it to him, and he gazed at it with pride. It was made of two straight branches, their angles reinforced with thinner ones, and bordered not with flowers, but with vine stems. It

reminded him, in a way, of the crosses of the Orthodox Church. He looked his wife in the eyes; she shielded herself with a wicked sulk.
"Don't you think it's appropriate?" he asked.
He approached her and kissed her on the cheek. How long had it been since he'd done that? How long had tenderness fled in shame before the fluttering of anguish? She turned away.
-I'm going to look for your prayer book.
Manuel planted the cross in the ground, secured it with stones, and stood waiting for Altea. The birds had finally fallen silent; only the rustling of the wind through the leaves could be heard. The dog had hesitated for a while, torn between following her and staying with him. Finally, he sat beside her, now calmer, until he lay down with his muzzle between his paws, glancing at the grave and Manuel, when he saw that he had squatted down, uttering phrases that sounded to his ears like the murmur of a tranquil river.
She returned and handed him the devotional book, a soft leather-bound volume with extremely worn edges and pages whose gilded edges were surely gilded. On the first page was the signature of each family member who had entered the cloister. She gave it to him carefully, as she had brought it, protected by her austere, white hands, like the talons of birds accustomed to the snow. He, however, received it like a piece of stationery he touched every day, familiar, with the scent of daily use and the warmth of hands that had already permeated the covers and each page. He opened it, searched with discernment, and marked the correct spot with the leather ribbon, which wasn't the original, but one of many sewn by some devout seamstress from Cádiz. He began to read the Office of the Dead, uncomfortable at having to make a selection he didn't feel suited for, uncomfortable also because the image he had in mind as he read wasn't that of the buried body. Altea saw him looking nervous, she wanted to ask, but suddenly he abruptly closed the book, and began to recite from memory, out loud, not as a prayer, but as a complaint.
- *Have pity on me, have pity on me, at least you, my friends, because the hand of the Lord has touched me. Why do you persecute me like God, and are satisfied with my flesh?*
Manuel's voice had choked with emotion, and Altea saw what she hadn't seen in all her years of marriage: how her husband could become a different man simply by letting his anguish show, and perhaps for that,

everything that had happened was necessary. It was a pity that all of it was irreparable, even what she carried in her womb. A child by another man, who was also the brother of the man she had never stopped loving. A rape that could only be atoned for through the victim's own pain, a child she could never be rid of, because God was there, among those trees, listening to Manuel's words, surely watching his ascending soul. She wondered how much courage the woman who killed him must have possessed. She had loathed her, but now she felt subjugated by the figure of that woman who had repeatedly struck her husband with that stupid frying pan.

It was Manuel who intrigued her, the pent-up impulse that created increasingly grotesque monsters in her soul. If only that thing inside her would die, she'd told herself hundreds of times since that had happened. If only it would die, if only she would stop eating, if only she would beat herself hard enough, if only she would consume what she had heard so many times from the mouths of the indigenous women over the past few years. She knew what she should take, which spice mix, how to prepare them to form the right dose. But she wouldn't do it because there was Manuel's face, the man who would never leave her, who would never stop loving her, and who would even make another man's child his own forever. If that wasn't because of God, what other entity could? At the masses in the Cathedral of Cádiz, she had heard that God was goodness and not terror. She had rarely understood it, and only now did she grasp it. But goodness in the hands of others was also as sharp as a knife. The love of others was cruel, and mercy a gift fit to be hated.

She saw Manuel's hands trembling as he gripped the prayer book tightly. Then she approached, parted his stiff fingers, clenched as tightly as any had ever held her. He was probably thinking of his brother, gazing at the grave. Then he repeated the litany, as the wind grew stronger, and the dog began to whimper inconsolably. Altea felt fear; her chest heaved, and a sharp pang tightened in her stomach. And fear turned to terror: what she had longed for might finally come to pass. Inside, she cried out, "No!" but she didn't quite know to what: to guilt or to loss. And what was loss, if not also the fear of guilt?

Manuel buried his face in Altea's chest and felt the cross Cahrué had given her, which she wore on a chain beneath the lace of her dress. For the first time, the cross didn't comfort him, but rather irritated his nerves to the

point of provoking the final burst of his tears. But soon that sob, which had begun so belatedly, was drowned out by another sound coming from the river: the horn of a steamship approaching the dock. They both saw the long, smoky shadow across the sky, which they could only glimpse through the trees. The dog darted toward the beach, and they began to run as fast as they could, she stumbling over her skirt, he carrying his weariness. When they emerged from the first trees into the bright afternoon light, they saw the large, old ship moving slowly down the middle of the river, surrounded by the smoke billowing from a single smokestack in dense clouds, and with the roar of machinery that seemed to be dying. The name was written on the side of the helmet, and they stood staring at the approaching hybrid monster. The name was written on the side of the helmet, in dirty, faded letters. The “Juan Manuel de Rosas” had finally arrived.

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When they realized the ship was coming from the south, bow to the north, they felt that disappointment could be a more wrathful emotion than the greatest passions, perhaps even more so than the one that had driven the murder of the man they had just buried. The ship was enormous, even for the width of the river in that area, where they had seen many barges turning. But for a ship of such a draft, it would be impossible, and they wondered how much longer they would have to wait for it to return south to Buenos Aires. Who knew how far it would travel first?
It was a ship suitable for ocean voyages, and it was equipped with steam engines or a boiler. The smoke rising from the single funnel was very black, and as the roar of the engines subsided, it took on a grayish hue. An intense smell of resin and kerosene filled the air, and several men began to lean over the side, waving their arms in greeting. They heard shouts and calls, along with gestures they didn't understand. Manuel said:
-I don't think they can get any closer.
Then someone wearing an officer's cap approached the rail and clapped his hands, shouting:

- Are there any passengers?!
"Yes, but we're on our way to Buenos Aires!" Manuel replied, and felt Altea cling to him desperately: "We need supplies, don't leave!"
They saw the crew talking amongst themselves. The officer shouted:
- We'll lower a boat! Stay on the dock to hold the ropes!
Manuel nodded, and said to Altea:
-You'd better fix up that box a bit…
- Why? Are we going to hide what happened from them?
"It's not my intention, but we don't know who they are..."
Altea observed him for a moment with puzzlement, and a very faint glimmer appeared in her eyes. She turned away from him and called the dog to accompany her.
-Max- he heard her say.
She had already baptized him, Manuel told himself, later he would ask the reason for the name.
The men had lowered the boat to the side of the hull, its wood faded and covered in mold. It was already past five in the afternoon, and the cold intensified as the sun set behind the trees. The shadow had already covered the entire width of the channel. The birds in the surrounding area had awakened to the noise of the machinery and the men's shouts. They all seemed to be competing with each other, a novelty after the routine stillness of all those days.
The officer had also gotten out, and halfway down he stood up to shout to the ship to stop the engines and anchor. The boat finally reached the dock, and a sailor threw the rope to Manuel, who tried to tie it to a post.
Someone told him that wasn't the way to do it, and when he looked back at the boat, two other sailors were already arguing and complaining about his clumsiness. The officer, who must undoubtedly have been the captain, intervened, seeing that Manuel wasn't a strong man and didn't know about these things. He got up and jumped onto the dock after his men had secured the rope. He approached Manuel with his hand outstretched and a smile that was noticeable not so much on his lips, but in the movements of the facial muscles beneath his thick, dark beard.
-I am Captain Mendoza, at your service, sir…
-Manuel Menéndez Iribarne.

They shook hands, not letting go for the duration of the gaze they fixed on each other. In the captain's eyes there was an innocent sweetness, the same kind Manuel had seen turn into cruel acrimony many times before, because for the type of personality he sensed in the captain, it took great composure not to let tragedy become bitter anguish. He didn't know why he thought of all this as their hands touched, hands which, with tender anxiety, he had joined together in clasping his own.
"It's a great pleasure, Mr. Iribarne, to meet people like you. I've already noticed your accent from the mother country. My grandfather arrived in these parts more than a hundred years ago..."
- Could he perhaps be a descendant of Don Pedro...?
"A descendant of abysmal people, that's right..." the captain affirmed, smiling. "But far removed from the glories of our ancestors. You see me now..." and he gestured toward the ship and its crew, the two men unloading the crates of provisions.
"Captain, I wish we had time to talk, but imagine, my wife and I have been stuck here for many days, waiting for the ship that will take us to Buenos Aires and from there to Spain. We are devastated and confused, and I'll tell you later what has happened to us in the last few hours."
The crates were piling up, and the dock seemed to be straining under the weight. The sailors asked if they should be taken somewhere else.
"Yes, please, to that booth over there." She pointed to the light Altea had turned on. "It belongs to the caretakers, but they both disappeared last night. I'll tell you about that tragedy later. You'll spend the night with us, but we can't offer you much comfort; everything here is very basic."
The captain burst out laughing.
"Mr. Iribarne, perhaps you think we're a first-rate crew, but don't be fooled by the size of the ship. We're river men, and the ship you see is a relic from the time of Rosas. It's a vessel that was part of the French blockade, although it was already quite old, having been built during the Napoleonic era. You can still read the original name under the paintwork; it was called ' *La Conquéte* .' They say Rosas appropriated it when the blockade was lifted, although officially it was a gift from the French. Afterward, it lay abandoned in Buenos Aires. Two years ago, I bought it in very poor condition, without my family's approval, of course, but it was a unique opportunity. I converted it for steam engines, thinking the expense would

be offset by the increased speed, but all I've gotten are delays and more expenses."
As they walked towards the booth, Manuel wanted to know more.
- But isn't it difficult to navigate the river with such a draft?
"We also made repairs to the keel, of course, but we still have to be very careful, especially during periods of low rainfall. However, because of its size and power, it's the only one that can travel up to the northern zone, even venturing into Paraguay and Brazil. That's where we were headed, or rather, where we were headed, until we ran into several setbacks. One is the one you already know about, the breakdown that stopped us for more than two weeks; another was a family matter. But we'll talk about that later."
Manuel was more worried about Altea than about himself. The arrival of the man he could talk to and the excitement he felt after his forced isolation seemed to have renewed his spirits. What the two of them would do was uncertain, but the idea that they would have to stay there for a long time no longer seemed so unbearable.
They arrived at the cabin, barely lit by two kerosene lamps. Manuel introduced Altea to the captain. She had changed her dress, washed her face, and fixed her hair, but he could tell she was trying to stay in the shadows so the captain wouldn't see her haggard face. The captain was friendly and forgiving of informality.
-Don't worry, my dear lady, we have brought you food and kerosene.
The men had stacked the boxes in a corner, while Max sniffed each one, excited and fearful. They had noticed the bloodstains, but covered them with the boxes. One of them approached the captain and spoke to him in a low voice. Manuel became flustered like a criminal.
-Captain Mendoza, I will explain what happened to us.
The chairs were broken, so the three of them sat on the crates. The men went back to the ship to look for other things. The lamps were burning out quickly, and Altea got up to replace them, but Mendoza refused to let her bother. He saw she was tired; he would do it for them.
"You know, my wife and son are on the ship. She's very fastidious, very strict, and prefers to stay there, but I'll spend the night with you if you don't mind. We have a lot to talk about, especially what you'll be doing. I can't back out, not for technical reasons, but because of the contract. The

ship is my property, but I make my living from the cargo and passengers I transport."

Manuel and Altea looked at each other in the darkness, which suddenly vanished when the renewed light illuminated almost the entire narrow space. Mendoza was surprised by that look, which was more one of suppressed anger than sadness. He wondered what would have happened between husband and wife if he hadn't arrived. He wondered whose blood was on the floor.

Then Manuel began to tell her the story of the previous night, what had happened between the caretakers, or rather, what he assumed. In the morning they would take him to see the man's grave. Mendoza listened attentively, reading in Manuel's voice a kind of perpetual apology, a hint of responsibility in his tone. In contrast, he saw haughtiness and defiance in her gaze, and it reminded him of Natacha, his wife. He hadn't done well to let her and the boy accompany him on this trip to Brazil. Ariel would learn about the river; he was already fifteen, but his mother's overprotectiveness was becoming increasingly difficult to counteract. She had been adamant that she wouldn't let Ariel follow in his father's footsteps, but the Mendozas had never been anything but naval men. And when Ariel, raising his head for the first time while they ate, a month earlier, defying his mother with his eyes, had said that he too would be a sailor, she had begun what she called her *Via Crucis* . The entire Catholic catechism emerged from it as both a shield and an arsenal.

The dog had lain down at the captain's feet while Manuel spoke, and slowly sat up to rest his head on one of his legs. Mendoza stroked him as Max drifted off to sleep, lulled by his new master's words and voice. Manuel's voice was monotonous but gentle; to truly hear it, one had to listen very closely. And that's what Mendoza was doing, his gaze fixed on the face of the man who spoke to him, half-hidden in the shadows, for the lamps were burning out rapidly.

Manuel fell silent, and his silence felt like an interruption, even though he had already finished his story. It was simply complete silence after the smooth tones of his voice had shaped the air of the cabin, filling it with a murmur that matched the flickering of the lamps. The dog was the only one who had drifted off to sleep, but even Mendoza and Altea felt a sudden

break when the silence fell. She knew, for an instant, how alone she would be without Manuel's voice, seemingly always invisible.
"Don't worry, Iribarne, as soon as we find the first authorities, I'll give them a report of what happened. Tomorrow we'll go see the body, just so I can have written proof that I saw it myself. Don't you know their names?"
No, they had never asked. They felt ashamed of this kind of negligence, but the only excuse they could give was that their anxiety to leave the country as soon as possible had made them believe they wouldn't be in that place for more than a few hours.
- And why here, in this isolated place?
Our village, where we taught for over three years, is inland, near a place called Toba. From there, they took us by oxcart to a parallel branch of the Paraná River. We crossed it, continued on foot and by oxcart, until we reached this spot, where they told us a ship passed through to Buenos Aires. As you can see, Captain, we're used to this life, but we decided to leave...
- I see, this is not the place to raise a child, I understand.
Altea was startled and couldn't help but let out a sharp scream, which she covered with her hand.
"Excuse me for asking, Captain Mendoza, but how did you know my wife is..."
"Come on, Iribarne, there's no need to be so fussy in this situation. I have a wife and a fifteen-year-old son; I understand things..." And he smiled, stroking the dog's head. "Like this friend of mine, whom I'm reunited with after a long time, and in better hands than before."
- How...? All we know is that he escaped from some fishermen.
"I can imagine, because they beat him mercilessly. They're fishermen from Coronda, all thieves, they live in squalor and raise their families in filth. They do everything: they fish, sometimes they farm on land they've seized. This animal was stolen from some relatives in Paraná; they've raised them ever since my great-uncles, the Hurtado family from Mendoza, brought the first pregnant female from Spain." "Forgive me, ma'am, for my language..." He laughed, getting up to refill the kerosene tank. Mendoza approached Altea and took her hands. She smiled as she looked at the dog.
"That's the smile I miss on my wife; perhaps meeting you will do her good," Mendoza said.

"I wish it were so," Altea replied, "but I highly doubt it. I'm very distressed, although your presence has relieved me of much sorrow. At least for tonight; who knows what tomorrow will bring. I'm exhausted, completely."
Manuel then hurried to mend the rickety bed a bit, and Mendoza helped him. In ten minutes they had finished nailing the planks together. Altea threw the dirty sheets outside and took some from her trunk. The men left her alone in the cabin and went out to smoke. They no longer knew, or there was nothing to say to each other; their minds wandered, one to the heavens, the other to the river, and the smoke from each of their pipes seemed to drift along the channels of their different thoughts. From the other side of the river came the hooting of owls, but the current was stronger now. The waves crashed on the beach, and only the foam was visible in the darkness. Max had followed them, and he was howling.
"I'm going to ask you a question, Captain, and please don't take it the wrong way. How did you find out about my wife? She's only six weeks pregnant and it's not showing, and women are usually more sensitive to these things."
Mendoza laughed and turned away. He inadvertently exhaled tobacco smoke in his face.
"The truth is, I didn't know until the dog came up to me while you were talking. I was stroking the animal's head, and it kept looking at me. So many things came to mind at once, so many questions. Tell me, didn't you wonder why the dog stayed with you?"
- Are you asking me if the animal had a thought when it came to us?
-Perhaps, but maybe I'm also asking about a function, a purpose...
- Captain, let's not confuse divine determinism with brutal instinct...
Mendoza turned his head to look at the river again.
"As you wish, my friend, because that's how I consider you from today onward, keep the excuse that on my travels I've helped many women in childbirth, and I've also been a doctor by necessity, *oui, monsieur, si vous aimez* . I don't know if you've read Leibniz; he must have been omitted from your Catholic upbringing, but there's nothing closer to religion in non-ecclesiastical philosophy than his. He speaks of the soul as independent cells, each containing the entire universe. My explanation is elementary and equivocal, but it says something similar. He even says that animals have souls."

Manuel stared at the captain's profile, pipe in mouth, against the sky, part starry, part cloudy. How did he know so much about them? He was suddenly enraged, feeling his body invaded by a fury very similar to the one he had always seen in his brother José. When Max howled, he kicked him, and the animal ran off to hide. Mendoza turned again to face Manuel.
- Why did he do that?

Manuel walked away toward the river, sulking with himself. That stranger had arrived with all his boastfulness, knowing everything, or almost everything, about them. And they were in his hands, both because of their future in that river and because of the body they had buried. He felt the anger he hadn't seen grow in all those years, since leaving Spain, since his father's refusal and the sale of the fortune. He saw in the river the contemptuous face of self-sufficiency, the jealousy toward his own brother, that boastfulness, that arrogance he had suffered as a threat. His brother, whom he hated because he had left him with the entire responsibility of a surname and a history. José's escapades with his friends, he kept quiet about; the women he brought into the house, he hid them; and how many times José had protected him, even with his own body, when Manuel, the weak younger brother, was insulted and beaten in the streets of Cádiz for his timidity, for his complacency, for what everyone considered his cowardice as a future priest.

The roar of the river created a backdrop of violent images, of thumps in dark, cobblestone, and muddy streets, where carts sped past the prostitutes' partners and the men and teenagers who hid in alleyways or the doorways of well-to-do families. The city of Cádiz and the Paraná River formed a single, vast, wide, and deep night in his mind, but above all in his ears. For he heard the moans of the prostitute he was with at that moment, and behind her, whispering in his left ear, José's voice, advising him, panting as if he were the one penetrating the woman against the wall. Manuel's legs bent, exhausted from going up and down, because he had almost the weight of his brother behind him, pushing him down, feeling almost as if José were reaching ecstasy at the same moment he was. And when it was all over, he knelt on the floor, his sex exhausted and soiled, while the woman said something he couldn't understand because his ears were ringing. He only understood because her hand was outstretched, shouting; then he saw the money José was handing her, and she left,

protesting, into the darkness of the street. Manuel looked up; José had placed a hand on one of his shoulders, leaning slightly, panting. There was a large stain of semen on his trousers. He said something obscene, laughing at Manuel's frightened face, and went to urinate against a wall. As he watched him from behind, the idea came to him: José's body like a crucified Christ against the wall, the two lines of the cross: his body and legs, one; his arms bent at the elbows, the other. A Christ hiding his face, looking at the object of his obsession, which he held in his hands. Then Manuel approached his older brother from behind, silently. He held in his hand the knife he had been given for his sixteenth birthday. He pushed José against the wall, cut his brother's pants with the blade, and, slipping the knife between his legs, touched his testicles with the tip.

“Go away,” he told him once, even twice, because José seemed like a fool, until he heard in his younger brother’s voice the result of his strange thoughts, of the dark bats he had tried to kill during so many nights they slept in the same room, watching him grow into a man capable of love. And there they were, his pursuers, the bats whose flapping wings were like razor blades.

Then José Menéndez Iribarne joined the Merchant Marine, and began to travel the world fleeing from what he always found again, and Manuel Menéndez Iribarne married a woman he hardly knew, and fled with her to America, in a pathetic simulation of evangelization.

He thought of Altea, who had undoubtedly already lain down on the old mattress in the cabin, where the caretakers had made love many times, drunk or sober, in ways he had only dared to imagine or dream about. And she didn't seem to care, despite her unflappable vanity, her cold, caste-like pride. My God, Manuel said to himself, murmuring softly, without trying to overcome the roar of the river, because the river was like God, strong and impetuous, never pausing to look at whom it abandoned or swept away. Some died sooner, others later. Always the same spirit of resignation, which he now didn't understand, suddenly and so abruptly, as if he were seeing God himself making love to Altea. And he thought of Captain Mendoza. Where had he gone? Was he going back to the ship or sleeping outside the cabin? He thought of Altea's face: always the same, and yet, she had seduced her own brother.

Manuel beat his chest, annoyed by his sacred ignorance, sacred because it was so profound in his apostolic stubbornness. It was satisfying to feel like a victim, the object of deception and strategic abuse, but also very accommodating. The attitude of the saints, sometimes, according to the accounts of the Church Fathers, was too simplistic. Resignation was needed, and turning the other cheek. But the saints of the Church had also felt jealousy, they had also felt lust and an obsession that blurred the lines between cowardice and violence. The reason of the saints gave birth to monsters, and Goya's etchings appeared on the river: winged monsters and witches on broomsticks flying over the waters. Naked women riding enormous phalluses, moaning and weeping and screaming as in a witches' sabbath.

He thought of Altea, that perhaps at that very moment Captain Mendoza was enjoying his wife, and she was enjoying a body trained by the vicissitudes of the river, a far cry from Manuel's scrawny body, thin and weak like that of a failed seminarian. Because that was what he had feared in Spain until he could no longer resist, and when he finally chose God, Altea told him she was expecting a child. They were eighteen, and he didn't dare tell his parents the truth. He had lied to them, he had gotten his girlfriend pregnant, and from that moment on he felt shameful. The only thing he could do was get married and flee Spain, both of them, because she too felt ashamed. But Altea's shame was too dignified to be acknowledged. On the voyage, two months into the pregnancy, the child died. The ship's doctor was used to such miscarriages in such young women, especially in the middle of an ocean crossing. The ups and downs of the voyage, the storms, the changing weather, the food. “They weren’t prepared, boy, there will be others,” she had told him, outside the cabin where Altea rested. Manuel wept that afternoon, beside Altea’s bed, while she slept. The ship moved wearily, after the tremendous blows it had endured from the storm in the middle of the Atlantic. They clung to each other in the cabin, while the bed rocked with them on top of it, he praying the rosary his mother had given him, she trembling, but in a silence that tried to hide what she wasn’t. Then she began to vomit and complain of pains in her lower abdomen. Manuel left the cabin, pushed from one wall to the other in the first-class section corridor, because they weren’t traveling with the other immigrants, those on deck who were tied down to avoid

falling into the water. When he went to find the doctor, he found him bent over near a man who had been pinned down by a beam from the mainmast. Several people pushed the beam so the doctor could get closer. A woman, perhaps a nurse, handed him his medical bag. All this in the rain and wind, with waves crashing against the hull and splashing the deck. Manuel shouted, but no one paid him any attention. Some tried to make him go back down, others pushed him when he grabbed the doctor to go see his wife, but he ignored them. They pulled Manuel aside, and he fell backward to the ground, while many from the lower town laughed at him.

He refused to be defeated, then he saw several people pointing back the way he had come. Altea was climbing onto the deck, wearing only her nightgown stained red, while the rainwater scattered and washed away the blood. She gave him a look of pain through the rain, the same look he would see every time he looked at her afterward, until he fell to his knees on the wooden deck. Among the blood were, surely, the tiny fragments of his son, and the water carried them toward the ship's gutters, and the waves, crashing against the hull, seemed to return or repel them. They were all like heartless puppets, rag dolls at the mercy of God's will.

He never asked himself what he felt besides pain and astonishment. Hatred, perhaps, but toward whom? God cannot be hated, he thought, because God is, by definition, goodness. But he felt that, and so, if he could be hated, it was because he wasn't God. Why blame him for the vicissitudes of the world? If yesterday his son existed and today he didn't, then everything was as useless as shouting into the wind, for no one to hear. He didn't ask Altea, several days after the storm, how she felt, only if she was recovered. Ten of the passengers had died. The dead child wasn't among those numbers. He wasn't a person, not yet, to some, but Manuel knew that God himself had dissolved into blood, and the blood into rainwater, and then into salt water. That God was sinking into the depths of the ocean, as if he were being punished.

For the rest of the voyage, he went out on deck on the calmer nights, walking among the sleeping bodies of the poor migrants. He heard some of them hurling insults at him, and a couple of times they tried to rob him. But he stood his ground nonetheless, gazing at the moon over the ocean, so full, so beautiful, and yet crumbling, or bleeding out; he could no longer tell the difference. His son was dust, as the Scriptures said, but he was also

water. The moon was rock dust crumbling into the ocean, and God's last bastion was falling away.

But the moon over the Paraná River was different. The specters had vanished, leaving trails of wing tracks across the night sky, and the moon was larger than usual, a kind of immense molasses clinging to the sky, seething on its shifting surface, inhabited by thousands of people who, from such a distance, looked like moving stains, changing the hues from yellow to ochre. He could even hear the din they made, turning the night into a thunderous factory whose machinery stopped and started again in different groups out of sync, like an orchestra of chaos. And he, Manuel, on the riverbank, alone in the mud, felt that no one was watching him, since everyone was still busy with their own work. Crowds were the best places for anonymity, so he felt the urge to take off his clothes and stand naked before the river. Perhaps to swim at night, illuminated by the moon. So he did, plunging into the current, sometimes letting himself drift, sometimes swimming, and the water was warm and sweet. He wasn't bothered by the fish that brushed against his legs, nor by the branches carried by the current. He got out of the river and sat on the bank, his legs bent and his arms resting on his knees. He wasn't cold. He realized he was aroused, and began to rub his genitals, without shame this time, without checking if anyone was watching. There was no one in the thicket, and if there had been, what did it matter, since he would never know, even if he came face to face with whoever had observed him? Man's problem was knowledge. Gazing at the moon, he finished, ejaculating a thick semen whose scent only intensified his excitement, and he thought of Altea, lying alone or with Captain Mendoza, it didn't matter. He would slip between them and penetrate Altea right in front of him, this man who thought himself as self-assured as his brother José. He pulled on his trousers and walked quickly toward the cabin. The interior was still lit, and he was certain someone else was with her, because they had recently discussed the shortage of fuel for the lamps. The door was open, and he drew back the curtain that concealed the bed, the one he had put up to protect his privacy, that naive intention which she, the deceitful, the seductress, now mocked.

He expected to see them together, side by side, naked, licking each other, absorbed in the pleasure of their sweat-soaked bodies, united by skin and bone desire.

But Altea was alone.
She wasn't asleep. She saw him forcefully pull back the curtain until it fell to the floor. She had heard him coming down the path, his footsteps heavy and bare, even his rapid breathing, even the foul words he muttered aloud. She saw him standing before the rustic bed, almost naked, soaked from the river water, his torso caked with mud. She opened her lips to say something, but hesitated. Something was wrong with Manuel, and she feared that whatever was about to happen was irreversible, because she had never seen such a look in her husband's eyes. Gone was the sublime bliss he seemed to boast of at every turn, that stupid bliss that had made her come to loathe him over the years, replaced by a kind of fury born of resentment.
Manuel stood in front of the bed, agitated, and asked:
"You always blamed me for the child's death, didn't you? You never wanted to have another one all these years, at least not with me..."
Altea now knew the source of all that anger, and she had two options: to remain silent, as her pride dictated, or to continue the argument. The latter, perhaps, just perhaps, might bring Manuel to his senses. But she couldn't help but be direct and cold in her response, because that was simply her nature.
- Who made us leave Cádiz when I was pregnant, just to avoid gossip? I didn't ask you to, it was your decision, which I had no choice but to follow.
Manuel walked over to the bed and slapped her. She hid her face in her hands, but quickly pulled them away.
"You won't see me cry. You're just like your brother, but he's less of a hypocrite; he doesn't hide behind a saint's mask."
Then Manuel climbed onto the bed and lay on top of Altea. He took off his trousers and rummaged through her clothes. He tore the fabric and placed two fingers inside Altea. She stifled a cry, but soon her face adjusted to a sensation that Manuel must have deciphered as he rubbed her insides with his fingers, ecstatic for the first time to find that the body of this woman, into which he had entered so many times, this time did not reject him. Now Altea had a different face, and Manuel thought, as he writhed on top of her like a desperate dog, that perhaps what she needed was hatred. As if her body were the necessary channel for release, the instrument for which it had been created. Ice and fire, not ice and ashes. Because every time

Manuel approached her to make love to her, she was already ashes that were going out. Many times he wondered how and when that fire had been lit, and he only found out the day Joseph arrived by boat up the river to the town where they had started working.
She stood at the door of the hut that served as a school, surrounded by naked children who ran excitedly about every time a boat arrived, and Manuel was talking to some merchants unloading their goods at the port. She saw him glance up at the boat, where José Menéndez Iribarne stood at the bow, waving his arms and shouting cheerful obscenities that made the crew and those listening from the riverbank laugh. Manuel dropped his pipe from his mouth and didn't bother to pick it up from the mud. He returned some papers to the merchant and paid no attention to anything but his brother's figure at the bow, approaching like an idol across the river. Then Altea truly understood why they had fled Spain, from someone Manuel could only control by escaping. And the object of their flight had followed them, to keep them company. That was what José said when he got off the boat and stood before them at the door of the hut. The family had to be together. He also spoke of the usual business dealings that took him everywhere, and for a while he could use the coast as his headquarters.
Those were his words, as he hugged Manuel and kissed his sister-in-law on the cheek. Manuel was astonished, but showed neither annoyance nor joy. Everyone knew what it was about: José needed to hide for a while from the authorities in Spain or any other country. On the Corrientes coast, who was going to find him? But was that the only reason he was in that very place with them? Manuel, perhaps, didn't want to say it aloud, because his tone was one of anguish. Altea noticed it and felt ashamed of her husband. José saw it too, and a smile formed on his lips, and he didn't answer, and that silent, certain response remained latent in the air during those years they worked together in the town. Until that night of the rituals.
Altea knew very well who Manuel was thinking about while they made love, because he would glance to the sides from time to time, or upwards, as if someone were watching from above Altea's head. It was, perhaps, the crucifix, now absent, that every Catholic family used to have on the wall above the marital bed, or perhaps it was his brother's approval he was seeking. Both things, ultimately, were the same. And it was she, this time,

who felt not resentment, but a strange gratitude. She had recovered a sensation she had discovered only a few months before. On the night of the rituals, she too had received a kind of exorcism, though she hadn't known it at the time. José Menéndez Iribarne had exiled her from the dominion of ice, had shattered the liquid crystal in which her body's freedom was trapped. He knew then that the body was everything, and there were the crucifixes, above the bed of every Catholic family, to remind them, to revel in the pain, to say at every moment of life that the pain of the soul must begin in the body, and there is no freedom before that happens. That is why the body received everything first: sensation, doubt, resentment, and pain.

And there he was, above her, Manuel Menéndez Iribarne, finally himself, finally pure fire, like a burning tree that pierced her and set her ablaze. When he stopped, she waited longer, because she understood that it was only the beginning. Manuel remained above her, without moving an inch, aware of his weight on his wife's body, but she grazed his back with her nails, murmuring:

-When we have a son of our own, we will name him Jesus.

He got up, suddenly furious again. He left the hut, naked, and stumbled upon the captain, who was lying on a pile of straw by the wall, the dog asleep beside him. His eyes were open, for dawn was breaking. He said nothing to him, simply continuing on toward the river. He dove in as he had the night before, but didn't swim; he simply lay still, keeping his feet on the ground, not letting himself be carried away by the current. Captain Mendoza appeared on the path, along with the dog.

"It seems they became good friends..." said Manuel.

-After the kick you gave him... but animals don't hold grudges, a little resentment for a while, nothing more.

The captain took off his clothes, leaving his old coat with braid, boots, and trousers leaning against a tree trunk, along with the saber and scabbard he was obliged to carry. He jumped into the river and swam to where Manuel was. The dog barked at them from the bank, and they encouraged him to get into the water. He jumped in and began to play with them; they would lift him out and throw him back in, and the dog would go under and resurface barking.

When they got out of the water, they sat on the shore, watching the sun peek out like a shy boy over the forest.
"There's nothing better all day than these swims in the river, first thing in the morning," Mendoza said. "I can't do it on the boat with my son because my wife gives us dirty looks."
"Captain…" Manuel asked… "Can you take us with you north, or somewhere you think my wife and I could work on something suitable to us?"
Mendoza smiled.
"I was hoping you'd make that decision, Iribarne. You could send a letter to your country on a ship we happen to pass."
-It's not necessary, nobody is waiting for us.
It was true, or at least that's what he hoped. If José intended to follow them, like a shadow, then he would go to Buenos Aires and then to Cádiz. And it would be the first time a shadow had ever separated from the body it belonged to.

2

He looked at the mirror made from fragments of a moon mirror that had been in the wardrobe, the same one Manuel had broken at noon the day after he, José, had penetrated Altea. He had seen her cry and resist, but he had also seen on her face, after the fear had subsided, a kind of expression that Manuel had probably never seen in his wife.
And as he penetrated her, he felt a longing for his brother to see them, and to masturbate while watching them both against the wall, her skirt hiked up to her breasts, his pants down to his knees. Both panting, while José looked to the side, imagining Manuel, naked and fondling himself, ejaculating at the same time as him. As if he were thanking him for being able to do it with his wife, or perhaps thinking of him and not her. Because José was thinking of him when he imagined him naked beside them.

But Manuel stayed that night, almost until dawn of the festival, in the village, fulfilling his duty of assisting the village priests in the rituals, in the annual exorcisms. All of it had disgusted him at first, but then he had grown accustomed to it, and the dances, the smoke and incense of the burning spices, the guttural and anguished cries, the faces distorted beyond what he thought possible, had begun to fill him with ecstasy.
I knew Manuel wasn't in that room, but I also imagined him where he really was, standing in the circle of attendees at the ceremonies of that central night in the Indians' rites, when the demons were expelled from the bodies and minds of the possessed, who were left prostrate on the mud, torn by nails and claws that no one had seen because no one had touched them, as if the demons had made their way between the folds of the skin, from the inside out, leaving the inscrutable mark of their passage.
If Manuel had been standing there, watching his brother José and his wife Altea, like two excited animals, he would have thought, more accurately, that they were creating a demon. And this business of attributing thoughts and ideas to invisible presences, José had learned from his readings at his parents' house. The great library that the family had amassed over almost four centuries of existence in the province was so close, the walls lined with shelves full of books whose spines the servants barely had time to clean before they were covered in dust again a few days later. Sometimes spiders would appear when he took out a book, and he would leave them be while he slowly lifted the cover and carefully separated the pages. Books on alchemy, on religion, but above all on the arts of divination and superstitions. If even Cicero, whose works on these subjects had been valued by wise men, why did his family's religion create so much repression, so much guilt for the simple act of reading them? I knew the answer: just reading them makes you imagine them as possible. As Leibniz had said, thinking that something is possible, even God, already allows for its existence.
And his parents' religion didn't actually deny all of that; rather, it rejected it as the repulsive part of the universe. The Church, which had never been more than an institution with which the family had always had relations that were, in the end, nothing more than business dealings, had penetrated Manuel's mind and spirit too deeply. Ever since they were children and

slept in the same bed, she had seen him wake up startled, unwilling to say what nightmares had disturbed him.

But José was now looking at himself in the pieces of the old moon mirror, to which many other fragments had been added—fragments sometimes left behind by people from ships, mirrors that had been broken, or even ones he himself had secretly stolen. That's how he had assembled that full-length mirror on the adobe wall, glued piece by piece with an adhesive the Indians had taught him to make.

He liked looking at himself like this, as he was doing now, when he was alone, taking in every part of his thirty-five-year-old body: his Caucasian-featured head, aquiline nose, dark beard and mustache, thick, curly hair, his broad, hairy chest, his not-too-large abdomen with strong muscles, his genitals, which he was now fondling with his veined hands, arousing them as they already were after making love to the woman who was with them that night. He looked at himself from the side, his member erect, his legs slightly bent, ready to penetrate her again, because he saw her in the mirror, on the bed, waiting fearfully. The Indian woman's face was as familiar to him as if it were the same one he had seen since his first encounter with a woman. An expression of disgust that, nevertheless, did not reject the pain she was causing him. As if each woman, upon seeing Joseph approach, saw a kind of incarnate myth that would never be repeated, and therefore the mere fact of rejection could not be conceived without the consequent regret, or the frustration so close to guilt.

Then he heard moans, and remembering that Cahrué was with them, he looked at him. The Indigenous boy, whom he mentored in a way, had begun to accompany him on those nights that José spent with one, sometimes two, women. During the day, he observed those who approached the white fishermen, listening to conversations between the men, and had received advice on which ones let them do as they pleased. And it wasn't difficult for him to get them to come to his hut, and in recent months, almost the same woman came every time, occasionally bringing another if he asked her to. He didn't even know her name. When he asked her, she mumbled a long Indigenous name, which sounded more like a symbol or an onomatopoeia. She didn't mind Cahrué accompanying them, nor that he often participated. José's customs and tastes didn't surprise her.

But tonight, she looked distressed. Lying on her back in bed, legs spread, her vagina had bled. Both José and the boy had penetrated her simultaneously, and then they had both caressed and touched each other, and put her in the middle, pushing her, sticking their fingers everywhere, thrusting their members into her until she was a kind of lifeless bag, which nevertheless gasped and spat out secretions.

But tonight, she bled, and she knew why. After so many abortions since she was twelve, she thought her body was an internal scar, forever sterile. She was pregnant, and now she was losing it. When she saw José approach again, undoubtedly aroused by the sight of the boy at the foot of the bed, masturbating almost without looking at them, she made a reflexive gesture: she covered her face with one hand and her vagina with the other.

In response, he heard a laugh that echoed off the bed as he sat down on his knees, hands on his hips. It was true that she looked like a bad parody of Goya's painting, in that implausibly modest pose. The Menéndez Iribarne family had a painting by the artist in their house in Cádiz, and although he had never met him, his father always spoke to him about the time he had visited the house when his grandparents were still alive. But of course, it was a connection the family couldn't boast about if they wanted to maintain their good faith with the Church.

José tried to take his hand away from her face and began rubbing it against her. She let him, and then opened her mouth, but when he forced her to remove the hand that was covering her vagina, she resisted.

"What's wrong?" he asked. She looked up.

"It hurts," Cahrué said. "She's pregnant."

José turned around. The boy had already ejaculated and had semen on his hands.

"That hasn't been a problem for a long time," said José. "Or has it?"

He got out of bed and took the boy's hands, cleaning the semen off him with his own hands and leading him closer to the woman. For a long time, even before Manuel and Altea left, Cahrué had demonstrated great skill in healing. All the women in his family were healers, and he had learned by observing each one, resulting in a body of knowledge he guarded very carefully. José had discovered this when he performed an abortion on a teenager several months earlier.

The priest, who traveled through the region to celebrate Mass once a month, had been furious when the girl's mother accused José of getting her pregnant. The woman knew who had taken her to the cabin, but she wouldn't say that José's lover was from her own family—perhaps her sister, maybe her cousin; he never knew for sure. If he started investigating family relationships, everyone in that village was related to each other in some way. When the priest left, threatening to report him with a dismissive gesture, José saw him off on the riverbank with a few insults and obscene gestures. The girl's mother glared at him, enraged, but he knew that this prudish priest also had children on both sides of the Paraná River.

Then Cahrué had offered to do something for the girl.

"How?" asked José, who had already gone back into the cabin and started rummaging through the medical books he had brought back from his travels. Cahrué returned with a wooden box, and upon opening it, began to take out surgical instruments made of bone, some of them, others of stone. José looked at him in astonishment, then with pride. What the Menéndez Iribarne brothers and Altea had taught him had borne fruit. He was a boy of fifteen or sixteen, but he knew more than many of the white doctors who worked in the Paraná River basin. José realized this by listening to him and watching him work on the girl's body, lying in bed, while her mother watched, her arms crossed over her chest, at first bewildered and then frightened by her daughter's cries. Perhaps she remembered having gone through the same thing more than once, and perhaps she saw in José many of the men she had known. Then Cahrué's preparation put the girl to sleep, and only a low moan could be heard while he worked. No more than half an hour later, he handed the mother a cloth bag soaked in blood; it was what remained of her grandson, who was almost three months old. The girl slept for several days, burning with fever and sweating in the dead of winter. Cahrué gave her medicine with spoons and showed the mother how to do it every day. A week later, she awoke and wanted to get up. The mother was overjoyed, but Cahrué told her not to mention what she had seen.

"He's the one to blame, and he's not good for you," she said in loud and clear Spanish, glancing sideways at José.

Who was following whom? It was hard to say. José was his mentor, and that's why he accompanied him to learn and help him; it was a matter of

loyalty and gratitude. But José also seemed to be following him, never leaving him alone, not even at night.
And that night, as the woman bled, they both knew each other like siblings, or perhaps like father and son. They knew each other's bodies intimately, their habits, their minds' quirks, their hands' desires, and the harshness of their temperaments. They understood the meaning of certain glances, each other's intellectual knowledge, and also the hope for future discovery and the inevitable wonder in each other's actions and words. That's why Cahrué wasn't surprised by what José did: he rubbed his member with the semen he had used to clean himself and turned the woman over to penetrate her from behind. They both stared at the shattered mirror, the woman with her back to him, screaming, her hands frantically clinging to the soiled sheets on the mattress; he watching her body, satisfied with the pleasure of domination. He didn't seem to hear the screams, but she muffled them against the bed, because she didn't want anyone to come. She had always managed on her own, and she wasn't about to start asking for help now. Cahrué lay down beside her, watching her with curiosity: her hidden face bathed in sweat, her hands like two roots buried in the fabric, her still-beautiful body trembling with José's movements. He saw the blood trickling from her vagina, reached out, and touched it. He observed in the mirror—for her body concealed it—José's smile as he saw, or perhaps believed, what he was trying to do. He inserted two fingers; she did nothing to show she was aware, blind, seeing only the darkness on the mattress, as if it were a refuge of peace and relief.
Only blood, beginning to clot, but abundant. Inside, she felt the torn walls, higher up those of her cervix, like broken ropes, ripped fabrics, similar, in her imagination, to those she clung to. What was she thinking? Cahrué wondered. Perhaps clinging to her own body, as if at any moment she were about to lose it, that body that nourished her and not the other way around, as if it were a god, a master, and a home all at once? Or was she trying to hold on, perhaps without fully realizing it, to that other body that had formed inside hers, and was now dying, irremediably, dissolving like decomposing flesh?
Suddenly, she lifted her head, turned it toward the mirror, and looked at her cropped reflection. She felt Cahrué's hand on her vagina. She turned around with all her might, pulling away from both of them. José remained

kneeling, rubbing his penis, which was covered in blood and semen, and in Cahrué's hand was a handful of clots among which he saw a small, almost tadpole-like shape.
The woman didn't know what she had done afterward, or if she did, nothing in her entire mind could have prevented it. She got out of bed and ran to the mirror, but tripped over the strewn clothes and hit her head on the glass. Streams of blood stained the panes, but she made the absurd effort to hold on to the broken fragments, which didn't fall because they were stuck together. Her fingers were injured and no longer responded. She rested her face against the glass, and the edges cut her as she slid down. José went to find her, picked her up, and took her to bed.
"What a stupid whore!" he said.
Cahrué put on his trousers and went to fetch his surgical kit, as they both called it. Together they washed and stitched the wounds with the thread Cahrué's mother wove from green leaf fibers. But now she began to moan louder, clutching her groin. When they forcefully removed her hands, a gush of blood gushed out, continuing in a steady hemorrhage. Cahrué opened the woman's abdomen while José sedated her with a cloth soaked in ether. Blood and pus spilled down the sides of the wound. Cahrué withdrew his hand; there was another small body, identical to the first. He stitched the wound. When he finished, he looked at José, who still had his hand on the cloth covering the woman's mouth. She was no longer moaning or breathing.
José Menéndez Iribarne saw shadows hovering over the room, momentarily obscuring the meager light that drifted in from the oil lamps by the door and on the single kitchen table. He looked up. There were many shadows circling rapidly, and he couldn't make out the source of the flapping, leathery sound he was now hearing. They weren't wings flapping , they were membranes, and then he saw with striking clarity what he hadn't seen since his last departure from Spain. Bats were circling the bed, beneath the ceiling, and crashing blindly against the walls. Then he heard the sound of breaking glass. Fragments of the mirror were falling from the wall.
-Open the door, maybe they'll go into the darkness outside.
Cahrué, who had remained still, with the blood and the second embryo still in his hands, looked him in the eyes. José was attentive to the flapping and the shadows.

Didn't you hear me?
- What? Open the door? Why? Do you want them to find out?
- By the bats, you son of a bitch!
Cahrué looked at the ceiling, he only saw the reflections of the light on the pieces of mirror that fell to the floor.
José searched for his trousers under the bed, constantly glancing at the ceiling, trying to shield his face from the crimson shadows. The reflection in the broken mirror illuminated his face, but to him they were merely shadows of sound, like fluttering wings. He sat on the edge of the bed, pulled on his trousers, and, staring at the corpse of the woman whose name he never knew, shooed away two bats that had begun to bite her. He stood up and wrapped the body in the bedclothes. The blood was still damp and the mattress soaked. As he knotted the edges, he remembered the mattress maker from Cádiz who made and repaired the family's mattresses, and whose craft would disappear from Cádiz with his death, because his son had emigrated to America.
"Don Álvaro, I've brought you this mattress, let's see what you can do with it," she said aloud, smiling as she imagined the man's face when he saw her appear with such a specimen. "I've brought it from far away, because I only trust you."
Cahrué listened to him raving, but didn't interrupt. When he finished tying the knot, he lifted the wrapped corpse in his arms and walked toward the door. The boy stopped him and checked that the night was deserted. They turned off the lights, and the moon didn't shine either because it was cloudy. José went ahead, carrying the body, which was still bleeding from the cloth onto the dirt path they were following toward the stream that flowed into the Paraná River, a few kilometers away. Some dogs appeared and followed them, drawn by the scent. Cahrué threw stones at them. When they reached the bank, the current was almost stagnant.
José said:
-We have to go to the river and escape.
The boy went to fetch a couple of horses from a ranch. He took more than an hour to return. José waited, lighting a fire to scare away the animals. Keeping watch around the trees, he listened for the flapping of bats. Cahrué returned riding one of the horses, José placed the body on the other and mounted. They rode all night. At dawn, they were on the banks of the

wide and splendid river with its silvery waters. The four of them, men and horses, approached to drink. The body fell from the horse's back and rolled a few meters.

"It seems she's thirsty too," said José, "or she wants to go back to the water. Women are made of water, that's why they change so often. Men are as hard as rock."

He kicked the body twice, and it fell into the river. The current soon swept it away.

-In a few days it will be in the Río de la Plata, if nobody catches it before then.

They scared the horses back on their own. They would walk along the shore until they found a fishing boat or a small boat to take them to port. They had no clothes or money, but they would manage. If there was one thing they had learned in church, it was the holy sarcasm of "God will provide."

*

Dawn had broken prematurely, and she only revealed a smile when her thoughts roared with laughter: a premature sun, like the dead Indian woman's twins. Looking up at the sun, which was still not very high above the thick jungle on the east coast, she wondered if the sun, too, had been dead for millennia, perhaps millions of years, and what the world received was the ancient light that remained, traveling. She had read that this happened with very distant stars, but she was probably extrapolating concepts to indulge a morbid fantasy to which that morning was particularly suited.

The boy was still asleep, or at least he pretended to be. That peculiar Indian trait of dissimulation and distrust accentuated the features of his astonishing intelligence. She could do so much for him, if she could. Travel to Spain and send him to study. Indigenous features wouldn't be an obstacle in Europe; it was only in America that the Spanish emphasized ethnic differences, because they truly felt overwhelmed, lost, and insecure. So much endless space, so much wealth of golden and emerald-green waters, exotic animals, and men of incomprehensible customs—it was

against nature . Even though all of this was a manifestation of nature itself, it was as if nature had rebelled against the austerity of God. Not the austerity of the Church, from which her family had been buying credits for heavenly and earthly benefits for three hundred years, but the God of the Old Testament. That was partly what set him apart from Manuel: that submission to habit that only created monsters inside him, monsters he only let out in rare, uncontrollable outbursts of anger, which very few people knew about. He wondered if Altea had ever seen him that way; if she had, perhaps she would have truly fallen in love with her husband. Monsters and Goya, again. He missed Spain, sometimes, like now, as he sat on the muddy bank, watching the river's rushing current, its impetuous noise, the cries of unfamiliar birds with indistinguishable names, the exuberance of the vegetation whose intense greenness transformed into a vapor of decay as the day wore on. Only in the morning was the river's aroma tolerable; his elitist, monastic upbringing still held the mark of refined taste. Something inherited at birth, like estates, but estates could be lost, and noble lineage only vanished with death. And since he rebelled against this law, as he did against any law lacking the flexibility of common sense, he had striven to express his instincts and reflexes, his feelings and the tastes of the moment: he abandoned the education of good manners, but with them went his sense of modesty. He never felt fear, however; modesty, or shame, or rather, eternal guilt, had begun to die shortly before he left Spain. Far from his family, far from the Church hierarchy, in the middle of the sea, surrounded by men of a different class, he no longer felt guilt about his needs. Then he spoke like the others without having to do so in secret, and he did what the others did. He hit when he wanted, he lost his temper when he needed to, he urinated from the deck into the water every morning after a splendid drinking binge, or he masturbated in his cabin without hiding his moans, because everyone else did. Sex and brute force, at first, then the slow and now painless new learning of the necessary conditions.

That was what he sat contemplating: the river that sustained an entire habitat with just the bare minimum of conditions. But the river's conditions possessed an exuberance he had only recently witnessed in himself. The Indians knew it; it was within them, the very essence of their nature: the dances and ceremonies, the religion distinguished by its literal stripping

away of the arbitrary constructs of philosophy. Rituals were their religion, and the gods manifested themselves in these rituals as in their bodies. If they cried out without understanding, it was by the gods' pleasure; if they slaughtered or sacrificed someone without guilt or human motive, it was because the gods so desired. Their body, their mind, their spirit were a whole, and that whole, a tiny part of the god of their understanding. For it brought them peace to understand their need for a god, and as Western philosophies proclaimed, that need was essential. The difference was that once accepted, the manifestations of the god were easy to find. And all things in nature represented a form of ritual: the way a bird built a nest, or the courtship rituals before copulation in any animal. Man is a creature of habit, Dickens had said, and he would add, gazing at the fullness of life in the river, which acted immeasurably even within its own boundaries, that life is a succession of rituals. And the most convenient was God, because He always adapted to the mediocrity of man.

He saw a fishing boat coming upriver. Two men were walking back and forth on deck carrying nets, and one or two dogs were circling, barking. It was then that José realized the animals were playing with someone else. The boat slowly drew closer, nearing the shore. On the west bank, where they had slept, there was only that clearing. He wondered if they should hide, and answered no. He went to wake the boy, but the boy was already staring at the boat.

"We'll ask them to take us somewhere, we'll tell them we were robbed." But he sensed that those men wouldn't care about his motives. Most likely they were smugglers posing as fishermen; the trade from the Río de la Plata to Iguazú and the tri-border area was rife with them after the war's restrictions.

They stood up and began calling out, waving their arms. The crew stopped to look. They were no more than fifty meters away. He could clearly see that the fishing boat was larger than those usually used by the river's inhabitants. He had no doubt now; they were smugglers, so he knew he had men he could handle, not that vague, slippery substance often called a decent man.

The boat had a smokestack, but it wasn't emitting smoke, so he understood why they had abandoned the nets and taken up the oars. A woman then appeared behind them, accompanied by dogs that barked at the strangers

they saw on the shore. She shouted at them sharply, with an unmistakable expression that seemed to have been reborn in her mouth after many years.

- Shut up, troublemakers!

The men roared with laughter; one even dropped his oars and grabbed the woman, lifting her skirt. Struggling, she managed to break free and nearly pushed him overboard. They were drunk. The boat slowly approached. The woman looked rough, her expression clouded, her hair disheveled, and her dress dirty. When she got rid of the man, she ordered them to keep rowing.

José was surprised by this sudden eagerness to approach two strangers: a white man and an Indigenous boy. Perhaps it was that combination that attracted her, because she was undoubtedly the one in charge of that fishing boat, or of that small band of river robbers.

When they could no longer advance without risking running aground, one of the men spoke:

- What's wrong, buddy?

He was from the provinces of Corrientes; his accent betrayed him despite his drunkenness. He wasn't old, but he was worn down by the years. The other man was young, not much older than Cahrué, with a thick, dark beard and hair on his arms and chest. He was the one who had tried to grab the woman. She leaned on his shoulder, waiting for his answer.

-Hello, my partner and I are lost and hungry. We were robbed…

The men looked at each other, but above all they waited for the woman's approval.

"And what was he doing by the river?" she asked.

"The boy is my guide, ma'am, and the boat they stole from us is mine. I'm an explorer, for lack of a better word. José Menéndez Iribarne is my inspiration."

The woman burst into laughter, full of sarcasm.

"So that's what we have..." he said. "An uncle who comes to America as a tourist."

The old man seemed to understand in his own way, because he said:

"You come here to work, gentlemen, not to live off us..." And he planted himself in the middle of the deck, pointing with outstretched arms at a nonexistent crowd. "All of you come here to take our bread, all you

immigrant sons of bitches..." He was so angry he almost fell overboard. The youngest man held him back, still laughing, and the woman turned to José:
-Don't take it the wrong way...
-You can get in, that's fine. We'll take you wherever you're going.
"After we pick each other clean to see if we're worth anything," he murmured to Cahrué before diving in to swim the few meters that separated them from the ship.
They didn't receive much help getting aboard; they were simply given oars to hold onto and pulled in. Once on board, they both looked like two wet ducks, but since they were only wearing shorts, they were told the sun would dry them quickly. The men resumed their interrupted work with the nets, while the woman watched them sullenly and with a scowl, her hands on her hips, though one hand was just a stump. The dogs sniffed at the strangers and backed away, growling if anyone tried to touch them.
"Calm down!" she said, but Cahrué walked towards one of the dogs, and before she could stop him he was already petting its back, and the dog was licking the scratches on the boy's leg.
-He looks like an Indian. And you, sir, where are you from?
-From the mother country, compatriot, I already realized that you are from Aragon, from the highlands, if I'm not mistaken.
She opened her eyes suspiciously, then laughed.
-That's right, but I left there six years ago.
- And what's so special about it?
-God asks fewer questions and forgives more... Don't you and the Indian want something to eat?
-Actually, we ate last night, before the robbery. We would just appreciate it if you could take us to a town to file a report at the police station.
She hoped this plan would work; if so, they could all speak more openly. She noticed the men turn their heads toward them for a moment, but they pretended not to notice and continued preparing the nets. She looked at José without showing any expression. His stern, dark face was reminiscent of the old Aragonese families who, despite having lost their fortunes centuries before, retained a racial pride that neither poverty nor disease could erase. They were stubbornness personified, maintained with all due respect, even violence. For them, there were no laws but their own.

-I didn't get on board until yesterday afternoon, at the small port a few kilometers downstream. Guys, did you see any new people on the river?
-No, Mara, only the couple who were waiting for the ship to Buenos Aires.
She punched him hard in the face. The idiot had given away a name she was going to keep hidden for as long as she thought necessary.
José had many questions on his mind: why did they obey her so submissively and call her by her first name if she had arrived less than a day before?
"Are you from here, Mara?" he asked, then, in a loud and clear voice, confident after that long night.

She crossed her arms, silent for half a minute, then shouted:
- To hell with all of you, I should kill you like the other one!
He turned around to go into the cramped space that served as a kitchen, when he turned back and said:
-You come, the Indian can keep the dogs.
José followed her, and suddenly his eyes went blind, such was the gloom that disturbed his vision after the silvery reflection of the sun on the river, to which he had never quite grown accustomed. He rubbed his eyelids, and she took his hand and led him no more than a meter toward a small wicker bench. The air there was cooler, and the scratched skin on his back felt relief. The woman approached him from behind to examine his wounds.
-These weren't made by the blows of a thief…
-It must be because of the tree branches we lie down on…
"I'd say it's from women's fingernails, unless you slept with wild beasts last night..."
The woman laughed as she walked towards a built-in pantry and looked for a bottle and a glass.
-Help yourself with this, it will quench your thirst.
José drank the small glass of cane liquor, and it really did him good.
"Now you're going to tell me the truth. I don't believe this robbery story; we all know each other in this part of the river..."
José settled himself on the rickety little bench, which creaked and groaned without breaking. He didn't need to ask about the conditions.
-And if not, we'll throw them overboard, it's all the same to us…
-I can imagine…

-Very well, old-school Spanish gentleman, if you know so much, then sing, as the Creoles say…
My partner and I cannot return to the village due to circumstances beyond our control…
- Any women involved in a mess? You don't look like a thief…
José shrugged.
-Something like that, a little more complicated.
"I can already see you in a terrible mess, considering those wounds on your back. You must have raped some Indian woman, and I'm sure you taught everything to that little Indian boy who follows you around. Now there's no stopping the savage; he learns the sex that white men practice like perverts."
José watched her with intense curiosity; his eyes had already adjusted to the dimness, which wasn't as dark as he had initially thought. The reflection of the water created waves-like lights on the wooden walls of the narrow cabin, which was permeated with the smell of fish.
-From what I've seen, you own the ship and the group…
-None of that, the one who rules is the one who knows how to impose himself, those...- he said, making a movement outwards- their heads aren't very bright.
Then they heard the dogs growling, and then high-pitched squeals. They peered out the door and saw that the younger man had grabbed one of the animals by its hind legs, tied them together, and was now lifting it up with its body and head dangling over the side of the boat. The dog was squealing and thrashing desperately, nearly drowning as the man submerged and lifted it. The old man had stopped sewing holes in the nets to watch and was laughing. Cahrué was tied up with an old net.
"Those sons of bitches, always the same thing..." she said, storming out. She shook the boy with her one hand, but since he was strong and resisted, she grabbed a piece of wood and hit him on the shoulder where he was holding the dog. It was enough, but the animal fell into the water and soon disappeared in the current.
She began to beat the boy with sticks, and the old man approached, but stopped when she glared at him angrily.
"You beasts, you sons of bitches!" And he didn't stop until the boy, lying on the floor, stopped covering his face because his arm was broken in two.

"That's what you get! Now you'll work twice as hard, broken and even dead you'll work!"
He threw down the stick, and looking around, said to Joseph:
"Let the Indian go. He's going to have to earn his keep on this ship if he doesn't want to end up like the dog..."
It was already mid-morning. The boat was anchored. The two men set to work in complete silence. The old man glanced toward the cabin from time to time, with a sullen look, pushing the younger man when he complained of the pain in his arm, which he had splinted. Cahrué joined the fishing party without complaint, diving to stretch the nets or unhook them from the hull, then climbing back up without help.
In the cabin, she had started cooking the fish from the day before, keeping an eye on the oven and taking a swig of rum now and then, taking the opportunity to glance at the men. José had remained seated in the wicker chair, as she had instructed. He wasn't about to argue after what he had seen.
"Those sons of bitches have already made us lose two dogs in two days. They're purebred; we got five a week ago. Two died because they were injured when they caught them. Another one escaped yesterday because they were beating it, and now this one today."
- And what do they use them for?
"To hunt, of course. Or do you think we eat fish every day? We take them down to the jungle and those useless dogs hunt if they find something."
When the food was ready, she gave him a tin plate. She called out something to the men, who went inside to get their plates. Cahrué didn't come in, nor had she prepared anything for him.
Give the boy something, please. If there's nothing left, I'll give him my share...
She looked at him in amazement.
-It's clear she loves him very much, but don't worry, those can last for many days, I know them much better than you do, have no doubt.
She sat down opposite him to eat her portion with her hands.
-Well, now tell me what you were doing in that little town.
-My brother and sister-in-law and I arrived. They were like missionaries, they set up a school and taught basic subjects. I did trade in the area, but

mostly with acquaintances in Buenos Aires. That's how we supported ourselves.
She left the empty plate on the floor and went to get the bottle of rum. She was already drunk, and taking another swig with a frown and a suspicious look once again, she asked:
- Are you talking about a Spanish couple, both very conceited? He's quiet and she's as cold as ice?
Since José didn't answer, he assumed they were the same people.
They waited almost two weeks for the boat to Buenos Aires. I was with a guy I worked with looking after the dock, five kilometers downriver. One night…well…we both got drunk, more than usual, I hardly remember what happened before or after. We had a great time at first, then he started hitting me, and I didn't stay still, as you can see. That night we slept there, and they slept outside, I suppose, because they weren't there in the morning. I woke up and everything was a mess. My roommate, the guy I'd been living with for eighteen years, was lying on the floor, his head split open. I still had the frying pan next to me when I woke up.
He started laughing and didn't stop until he cleared his throat and coughed. He cleared his throat with more brandy.
I left everything as it was and went out to the beach. They were supposed to come that day to make the deliveries, so I got on board. The dog I told you about ran away, jumping into the water and swimming to shore. When I got back on board and we were sailing away, I saw his family lying next to a rock, and the dog had joined them.
José listened in silence, watching as she gradually dozed off from the effects of the alcohol, the food, and the drowsiness of the approaching afternoon. The empty bottle fell to the floor. She stood up and placed her one hand on the surface of the oven, which was already cooling. She was tall and had trouble keeping her balance. With her eyelids slightly drooping, she walked toward a cot that José hadn't noticed in the dim light. She lay down and seemed to fall asleep.
He looked outside. The men were taking a siesta. Cahrué was still sitting, petting the only dog left. He picked up the fish remains and took them to the boy.
- What are we going to do?
-Nothing yet, we need someone to take us to a town.

He climbed back into the cabin and sat down on the bunk, gazing at her serenely and calmly, without that constant defensiveness that marred her appearance. He thought about how he had almost missed Manuel and Altea; he had assumed they were on their way to Buenos Aires, waiting to return to Cádiz. But they were still on the coast, among rivers so different from those of Spain. Both had wanted to escape, searching for something different, and here they were, trapped by a nature that seemed to penetrate them, making their quiet souls, subjugated by guilt, swell with pride. They had exchanged the ancient stone walls of Spain for the American prison of unfathomable vegetation and rivers that exhaled vapors of decay and weariness. From extreme dryness to unbearable humidity. Which of the two would turn their bodies into skeletons sooner remained to be seen.

It was mid-December. It must have been around two in the afternoon. An hour when men agree to absolute silence. Only things make a sound: a clock, a horse-drawn cart, a dog barking, but those were the sounds of a city. There, on the other hand, the flow of the water was constant until the ears could no longer perceive it, and only the cries of birds, almost always unidentifiable to their urban upbringing, interrupted the silence, and for that very reason, intensified it. Even Cahrué had fallen asleep; the men were snoring, none of them noticing that some birds were settling on the riverbank and pecking at the old fish remains.

He was the only one awake, watching the woman sleep. He moved closer to her, letting her breath touch his face, inhaling the scent of liquor that emanated from her clothing. He saw the shape of her breasts, ample beneath the dress, which wasn't even bra-lined. With one hand, he slowly untied the knots, never taking his eyes off her face, trying to guess if she noticed and let him continue, or if she would suddenly leap up in a rage to strike him. Neither happened. She seemed asleep, and that was enough for him. He slipped his hand inside her open neckline and gently caressed her breasts with his fingertips, then her nipples, still looking into her eyes. He held one breast in his open hand, applying slight pressure, then did the same with the other. Her face no longer looked like someone who was asleep, but like someone whose eyes were simply closed. It was clear to José that she was allowing all of that, but he didn't know to what extent, which is why he kept his eyes fixed on her face.

His right hand slid from her breast to her abdomen, caressing her skin in slow, spiraling circles that descended toward her pubis. The dress was a simple garment that tied in the front, so when he opened it completely, he could see her full nakedness, sweaty and smelly, it was true, but just enough to feel aroused. He didn't like extreme, odorless cleanliness because it didn't seem human. The smell of cosmetics mixed with sweat that he had encountered in the prostitutes of Cádiz, or the smell of spices and mud in the Indies, or this aroma he now detected in Mara, a mixture of brandy and river water, excited him without a doubt.
His hand slid down until it found Mara's wet sex, and then she gave a very slight start, without opening her eyes, and let out a sigh like someone in a dream. "Oh God of whores," José prayed, smiling, "how you like this, my darling." And inserting his fingers into Mara's vagina, she drew her legs slightly closer, sighing. Then José took off his pants and lay on top of her, at first without touching her with his body, supporting himself on the mattress with his knees and one hand, while with the other he continued caressing her. When he penetrated her, she opened her eyes, barely, without looking at him, so as not to interrupt the pleasure or the concentration. She knew that he was attentive to her reactions, and she didn't want to frighten him, but rather for him to continue, to keep going, not to interrupt this act that she found strange not in itself, but because of the way it was being performed.
The mattress creaked, and the afternoon shadow crept into the cabin. José knew someone was watching from the doorway; he didn't care which of the three men it was. She wasn't screaming, nor was he; there were only moans, no louder than the constant hum of the electricity. And when they both knew they were about to finish, he held her head on either side and began kissing her, biting her lips, then her throat and breasts, ejaculating and feeling Mara's body shudder with ecstatic chills.
They stood still, silent, and he turned around. Cahrué was standing in the doorway, his eyes filled with tears.
"You're going to leave me, aren't you?" she said, her voice filled with the most profound anguish I'd ever seen. She didn't wait for an answer. She went back down to the deck, where the others were still asleep.
Mara placed one hand on José's shoulder, the stump of the other on his back. She tried to hug him like that, without saying a word, with a look of

helplessness that seemed to return to her face after being repressed for countless years. It was a look that suited her, almost bestowing a strange beauty upon her weathered face. That's why she tried to hide it by hugging him, so he wouldn't see her like that, defenseless and vulnerable, any longer. That was over, until she decided otherwise, as she had this time. She had sensed the man's scent, an ancient and acrid aroma; she had felt the roughness of his skin even before touching him, simply by looking at him. That scent had permeated her throughout the afternoon, and that was why she had drunk more than usual, to numb her fury, to keep her misgivings at bay for a while, to make her body her own and not the object of her eternal resentment. Now it was returning, and she no longer found the man's roughness entirely agreeable, and she needed to distance herself.

For the rest of the afternoon they didn't speak, barely deigning to look each other in the eye. The men hauled in the meager catch. The younger man watched her because she was silent and didn't shout at him or the old man. It was obvious what had happened between her and the stranger, and soon, perhaps that very night, he would settle the score. That woman was his. If he occasionally shared her with the old man, it was like giving alms, because he wanted to, and he enjoyed watching the old man's efforts. But tonight… he thought, as he hauled in the nets and dumped them on the deck, kicking the dying fish, sometimes crushing them in a fit of rage. She let him do it because she knew what he was thinking, and the old man did too, because he hadn't slept all afternoon, but had listened to what was happening in the cabin.

And so the sun hid behind the thick western canopy, casting the ship in a cold shadow. José sat on the straw mattress, watching her cook the remains of an armadillo that Cahrué had hunted that afternoon. They didn't speak, but there was a kind of silent communication, a tacit agreement of mutual understanding that neither dared mention for fear of breaking it. She decided they would all eat together on deck, and although reluctantly, she accepted Cahrué as well, since it was thanks to him that they had this supper. She had a table prepared with two trestles and a long plank. She told the old man to bring the wine he kept in his cubicle under the bed. He looked at her innocently, but soon a knowing laugh spread across his face, like a boy caught red-handed. For a moment, they all forgot resentment,

anger, and desire for revenge. The five of them ate around the table, she scraping the meat from the shell with a knife, the old man with a penknife he had bought in Santa Fe, the young man with a dagger he had taken from an Indian he had killed. They looked at Cahrué, but he ate with his hands and didn't look up. The dog was lying under the table.

Mara and José glanced at each other from time to time, and the young man caught those glances and swallowed them like poison. The old man passed around the wineskin and lamented that it would run out that very night. The night was starry, and every now and then the light of a bonfire could be glimpsed among the trees. José wondered if the villagers were looking for them; he wasn't quite sure they missed the Indian woman, and if it weren't for the blood she had left behind, perhaps they thought she had gone with them. But there was no going back now. He looked at Cahrué, who was avoiding speaking to him, and thought about what he had said that afternoon. But this reverie was suddenly interrupted by the thud of the young man's dagger on the table. It had lodged less than a centimeter from José's left hand. The man had stood up, knocking the wooden stool to the floor, and without taking his hand off the knife handle, said:

- I'm fed up, damn it! Nobody's taking my woman away from me!

He pulled out the dagger and lunged at José. They both fell and began to fight. Mara pushed the table and tried to separate them, but she knew it was useless. José was pinned beneath him, resisting the hand that tried to plunge the dagger into him, but he wouldn't last much longer. He was going to die, she was sure of it; he wasn't a river man. Then she grabbed the knife she had used for the armadillo, and approaching the two who were fighting, she plunged it into the young man's side.

"Son!" they heard the old man say, but seeing Mara's eyes, he didn't dare approach. Cahrué hadn't gotten up; he was only holding the dog.

The young man fell beside José, his hands clutching the knife that had remained embedded in him. He pulled it out, and blood began to flow, spreading across the deck until it reached the animal, which began to lick it. Cahrué let it do so, while everyone watched the man die. It wasn't long, just enough minutes to see him scream and lament, to curse them all, especially Mara. He called her a whore. He called her a witch.

She didn't flinch when she heard herself called a whore, but when she heard the other word, she looked at the other men, as if someone had

suddenly revealed something she'd never wanted them to know. A shame that stemmed not from sex, nor from her drunkenness, nor from being a thief, nor even from murder, but from something she didn't understand. A mark she bore on the inside of her forehead, which she could read every time she closed her eyes.

José and Cahrué lifted the body and threw it into the river. The old man allowed himself a few tears, his hands gripping the railing, watching the body disappear downstream. Then he grabbed the wineskin and pressed it against his body, looking at everyone as if they were going to steal it. He lay down on the ground and began to drink what little remained.

Mara approached José, grasped his hair with her left hand, then his beard, ran her hand over his chest, and slipped it inside his pants, rubbing him, arousing him. They walked toward the cabin and the cot. They no longer needed to be silent that night.

Cahrué threw himself into the water and spent the night on the shore, covering his ears. The old man began to sing, drunk, slowly and clumsily, and when his repertoire ran out, he fell asleep with the empty wineskin pressed against his chest. The dog continued licking the blood until it dried, and even then he kept scratching the wood with his teeth and paws, obsessive and hungry.

*

They were both naked on the straw mattress. They weren't cold, despite the river breeze that drifted in through the doorless opening. They didn't even need to get dressed now; no one would come to bother them. José lay with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling of the cabin, smoking the last cigarette the dead man had given Mara. She took them from the pockets of her dress, which lay on the floor, lay back down beside him, and lit it. He watched her naked as she got up, rummaged through her clothes, and sat back down on the mattress, trying to strike a spark on the floor. Then the smoke seemed to rise from Mara's head, from her hair more precisely, and so black did it seem to turn to gold, and the faint reflections of the moonlight gave the impression that they were moving the hair, while

the smoke formed a kind of plane or dimension around Mara. The fleeting association dissolved as soon as she realized how absurd it was: she had thought of Medusa's hair. Perhaps, as soon as she turned around and looked her in the eyes...

She lay down beside him and handed him the cigarette with a smile. Her body was slender, with large breasts and wide hips. It was quite a sight to watch her walk those few meters naked, to see her throw herself onto the bed, to watch her breasts move almost joyfully. He accepted it, knowing who it came from, and let her rest her head on his chest, while she caressed him, unable to take her hands off José's genitals, sometimes rubbing them, sometimes simply resting her hand there, and sometimes holding them as if she were clinging to the mast of the barge they were on. She said so, laughing, and he asked her:

"Haven't you had a man for a long time?" And she glanced towards the door, which led to the deck and to the river that had carried the dead man away.

- Him? Half the time he was drunk and couldn't... He would get drunk right when we went to bed, it was like he was afraid of me and needed to get his courage up with wine or beer... and in the end that's why he couldn't... then he would get angry, and after a while of cursing, he would fall asleep.

-Maybe I was afraid of you, I saw you defend yourself...

Mara spat out a short, cynical laugh.

-That's when I want to, you've seen the opposite...

He nodded. They made love once more. Mara's sharpest cry seemed to echo up the river. Cahrué probably heard it because a night-bird's shriek seemed to answer, and that bird's voice was as high-pitched as the one the boy used to make when he went hunting. José heard it as he felt he was about to finish, and he thought of Cahrué as he did, not of her. He thought of Manuel, and it was like listening to him while he made love to Altea, this time like a real man, not in the guise of the timid, failed seminarian hopeful. Somehow, uncertainly, and for no reason, he felt content, and more than satisfied, he ejaculated inside Mara, grabbing her hair and shaking her until she had to drink the semen that was still flowing from her. And she, always so flustered, as furious as he had known her since they first stepped onto the deck, was now a kind of harpy who enjoyed the

force to which she was subjected, as if she had finally found the man with whom she could compare herself without fear of any disappointment.
The mattress creaked as they lay down again, side by side, this time without touching. They wouldn't make love again that night, so they talked, and she started the conversation. She smoked the rest of the cigarette, which slowly burned down until there was only a stub left that she couldn't hold, and she threw it to the floor.
- Do you smoke a pipe?
-No, why?
-You're welcome, I just imagined that a Spanish gentleman like yourself would have that custom.
José stood up and rested his elbow on the mattress and his head on his fist, looking at her questioningly, while he ran the tip of his finger over her nipples.
- How long ago did you arrive from Spain? You don't have any accent, it's only when you get angry that your temper comes out...
Mara laughed, this time with a strange cleansing of intentions in her.
-Eighteen or twenty years ago, I don't remember exactly, I went through so many things... I was twelve years old, I remember that well, because I lost my virginity then...
He stopped, glanced at her sideways, as if wondering whether he should continue.
I lived with my parents and eight brothers in the countryside, halfway between the mountains and a small town called Luna. We had little land and few livestock, sheep and goats. My brothers helped with everything from a very young age. I was the youngest; my oldest brother was almost ten years older. I started working as a child, at first milking because I wasn't strong enough, but later shearing sheep, and doing any other work that came up as my brothers got married and moved to other towns. There were five of us left when I was twelve. One of them was named Roberto. He was seventeen, I think, more or less, and he became obsessed with me. You know how it is when you're the only girl among several boys: some protect you, others don't care about you, and there's always someone looking at us with lust. You can't help it; that's just how it is. I knew that my brothers had the habit of going to Luna once a month to spend a whole night at the brothel. They'd get their fix and go back to work in the fields, wanting

nothing more than to sleep so they could get up early the next day and keep working. I'd see them come home half-drunk in the early hours, and they'd spend all of Sunday sleeping. My parents would let them be, and my mother would stroke my head, sighing as if she were looking at a saint. "My poor darling girl," she'd say…

Mara laughed bitterly.

"Poor old woman," I'd say to her now... if only you'd known. But I always thought she expected all of my brothers to do it, and she'd even have been surprised it hadn't happened sooner. The thing is, Roberto was kind of withdrawn, sullen, and rarely spent time with the others. When I was twelve, he became the head of the family because the older ones had left and my father had been in a hospital in Aragon for three months. He wasn't going to get out of there ever again. Roberto felt overwhelmed with work and responsibilities. My mother burdened him instead of helping him. Now that I think about it, it wasn't that bad; we weren't starving, and there was always something to do to earn money, but he felt, I think, too responsible for what happened to us. If anyone complained, especially the younger ones, or caused trouble, he'd get angry and hit them. It started with him forbidding me from going into town; I was only allowed to work with them, and he made me accompany him all day to keep an eye on me. He was afraid some guy would get me pregnant, and bam, another problem for him." I tried to shake off his watchful eye, but the more I rebelled, the more obsessed he became. Once, at the table, my mother noticed the silence between him and me. She sighed, as she always did when faced with the inevitable, and remained silent. That very afternoon, Roberto was lifting bales of hay and bringing them to me so I could tie them. He was shirtless, of course, and handsome, I admit. A man, even at that age, with a broad chest and thick body hair, dark skin, and a poorly shaven beard on a square face with a Mediterranean profile. I was twelve years old, thinner than I am now, of course, but I had already developed. I had firm breasts that were noticeable when I perspired, and above all, I know that he was excited by that smell that even I found overwhelming in the days leading up to my period. A pungent smell that I couldn't get rid of, just like my brother's gaze.

"Did he rape you?" asked José, who did not hide his own excitement, but Mara did not notice this time.

"Rape me? I thought about that many times in the following years. At first, I told myself no, then, faced with so many problems that arose, I blamed him for everything, but many years later, I told myself no again."
- So...?
It was simply that, something neither he nor I could prevent. I know how much he suffered; I saw it in his eyes, and that's when his left eye started to get sick. He said he couldn't see well from time to time, and he used to blame me for hitting him while we were struggling. Because I tried to stop him; I knew what we were doing was wrong. We were out in the middle of the countryside, under the midday sun, sweaty, but terribly aroused. My God, I thought, when I saw him approaching half-naked, and when he pressed me to the ground, holding my hands and forcing my legs open with his knees. The sun suddenly disappeared; he covered it with his body, giving me a shade of relief, a kind of coolness for which I was grateful. Then I felt him penetrate me. It hurt, a lot, which is why we struggled when I managed to free one hand, hitting him in the face, but of course I didn't have the strength to hurt him. Then I felt like I was going to faint, but I didn't; it was just a dizzy spell, like I'd been lifted into the air only to fall back to the ground very quickly. Something remained inside me, something of Roberto, of that man who was my brother, but who was ultimately just another man, nothing more.
Mara got up to look for another cigarette. She searched the entire cabin and found nothing. She came out naked; José saw her in the moonlight on deck, going to the sleeping old man, rummaging through his pockets, and returning with a small pouch of tobacco. Her body was outlined in the moonlight with fixed contours, as if the moon itself had drawn it. She lay back down, leaning her back against the wall, and rolled some cigarettes with newspaper. José tried them for the first time in his life, and they didn't taste bad.
"I didn't tell anyone. A month later I found out I was pregnant. My mother noticed, but she didn't ask me who the father was. She suspected, but she couldn't do anything. Roberto was the head of the family now that my father had died in the hospital. Since we didn't have the money to pay for the transfer from the hospital to the cemetery, the municipal workers took him and left him in a mass grave. Roberto suffered because of all of that, because he couldn't go to say goodbye, because he couldn't have a proper

burial, because he couldn't even give him flowers. He took on extra jobs; we saw him come home exhausted at one in the morning, only to get up at four and go out again. Three months later he traveled to the capital to pay for the exhumation and bury him in a grave in the municipal cemetery. He came back dejected, his left eye hurting more than ever, because they hadn't been able to find our father's body, mixed up in all the decay. My mother made him lie down, putting poultice on his eye. I was almost five months pregnant by then." I approached him, without reproach, and stroked him as if he were my father, whom I never got to say goodbye to. The family was in a bad way. Roberto couldn't work even half the time, only in the morning or when the afternoon sun was at its strongest. My other siblings blamed me for being a whore, and my mother began to waste away from all the anger she carried. The nearest neighbors found out, and one day they pressured my mother to force me to have an abortion. I sat in the middle, head down, while they argued. Some said it was too late, others that it didn't matter, saying that Sottocorno had terminated pregnancies of almost seven months without any risk to the mother. "Did she operate?" one of them asked. "No, not at all," another answered, "the child dissolves inside and is expelled as if you were having your period again." Then the voices grew less angry, more somber and secretive, in keeping with the passing of the afternoon shadow into the subtle twilight of the approaching sunset, which, however, was not yet too evident outside. Only in the house did the women begin to murmur among themselves, trying to keep me from hearing, but they didn't know that my hearing had always been very sensitive. Sottocorno was a witch; I had seen her going to and from the covens in the mountains on certain nights of the year, carrying bags with children and returning without them, very early in the morning, while a column of smoke rose somewhere on the mountainside. One day the villagers had beaten her mercilessly. They left her lying in the middle of a field, her legs broken. The next day, they saw her walking with two snakes coiled around her broken legs, which supported her while they healed. My mother agreed; the following Saturday they would take me to see her. Mara was about to get up again, but she remained seated, staring at the wall. Her dark hair was disheveled and tangled, and she smelled dirty, but José didn't care. Giving her time to recover, this woman who seemed a whirlwind of irrepressible actions, a woman of unimaginable strength, he

observed her back, straight, her skin tanned by life on the river, her firm muscles descending from the nape of her neck, covered in soft, dark hair, to her waist and buttocks, which he could see as she stood and walked toward the door. It was still dark, though the moon was waning. She leaned a shoulder against the right-hand doorframe, her arms crossed over her chest. Her back was to him, so he couldn't see her expression, but he imagined what she must be thinking: whether it was necessary to tell him all this, a man she had only known for a day, but for whom she had killed a man.

"Even though women are stronger than men, they always end up surrendering their weapons," said José, knowing that in doing so he was offending Mara's pride.

She turned around, her eyes filled with curiosity, and perhaps it was that sentence that convinced her. A man's silence would have convinced her of his folly, and therefore undeserving of the truth. Instead, he had challenged her. She returned to the bed, sitting opposite him, looking him in the face to tell him what she had told very few others.

She was Italian, the old witch. Because that's what she was, a damned witch who was older than she looked. Nobody knew when she'd arrived, at least not precisely. She still had the accent of a dialect that made her pronunciation very refined. You'd be mesmerized listening to her speak, even though you couldn't understand a word. The fascination lay in her hands, in the gestures she made. When I arrived with my mother and another neighbor, we went into the adobe house, old, but with clean walls despite the dirt floor. It had no furniture other than a cupboard against the back wall, from which she seemed to endlessly pull out everything she needed, because we saw her going back and forth several times, bringing cups and jugs to give us something to drink, and then cloths and vessels with which she seemed to be preparing something for me. There were chairs for the four of us to sit on, but I hadn't seen them when I went in. The things inside seemed to appear when they were needed and then disappear again, as if that house were the conscious mind of each of us. Do you understand what I mean?

José nodded. Mara gazed into his eyes, judging the thoughts of the man to whom she was surrendering herself. She feared him, but she trusted him, because they were beings of the same specter; she already knew that.

“Marietta,” said the neighbor who knew her best, a sort of messenger between the witch and the common folk, someone who eased the town’s superstitious fears. “You know why we’re here; this girl needs your help.” The old woman looked directly at me for the first time. Her gaze was sometimes clear, sometimes dark, disconcerting to me at first, but I realized that the afternoon sunlight that Saturday was similar to the day my brother and I had been together, and that house was also a refuge of shadow, like Roberto’s body. Instead of a masculine torso playing with the colors of the countryside, it was the old woman’s eyes and face that mocked the world’s appearances. She rose from her chair and walked toward me. I lowered my gaze, as if wanting to see her legs entwined with snakes.

"What an innocent child! Didn't you realize they were all stories to help the old woman earn a living?" said José.

"You don't know women..." Mara said.

"Believe me, I know them..." he replied, touching Mara.

Knowing shells isn't knowing women; that's for repressed friars. They were just stories when it suited her, because they tried to get rid of her several times, but they never could, because those stories provoked fear, just like the truth does. She came closer and told me to look up at her. With her hand, she forced me to, grabbing my chin. I was trembling. I already had a very noticeable belly, and I thought she would make me spit out the baby, or vomit it up, who knows. You're right, I was still just a girl, but in the sense that I believed the false stories invented by the old women in the village. To know the truth, you have to be a woman, and that's what I became that day. The old woman placed a hand on my head, and I began to hear a clamor of birds, then a cacophony of shrieks that turned into a roar that lashed the house like a wind. I looked around; my mother and the other woman were still sitting, oblivious to the commotion. I tried to get up, but the old woman held me down with her palm on my head, as if she were using all her strength, her expression unchanged except for her eyes being closed, as if she were thinking. Then I heard the barking of hysterical, agitated dogs, which didn't stop even when I shouted for the women in the room to hear me. I looked at them, but they didn't notice anything. I wanted to get up and hit them, even my mother, for leaving me in the middle of that fury, because the noise was coming from them: the famous

Furies of Hell. They spoke with those barks; they were bitches who were now in front of me, surrounding the old woman, accusing me of being a whore and demanding punishment for my brother. I screamed at them with all my might. "No! No!" I begged them to spare my life. But they were screaming in furious barks, and outside, the flapping of the birds was lashing the roof and walls, and I began to see how the wooden roof was sagging under the weight of the birds.

Mara was agitated. For the first time since going to bed, she reached for a bottle of liquor and drank what was left, until it was empty. She dropped it beside the bed. José watched her without saying a word.

- What? Do you think it's wrong?

-He was just telling me that if he didn't know you were a twelve-year-old girl, he would have thought it was all *delirium tremens* .

-You'd better shut your mouth if you're going to keep talking nonsense.

She was capable of hitting him over the head with a bottle, José knew it, and even though his intention was to add a little humor to all that delirium, he decided to just listen, for now, because sometimes it was the best thing a man can do with a woman.

Then I couldn't take it anymore, and instead of screaming—because no voice came out of my throat, really—I moved my arms and legs, and I felt myself being lifted off the ground. I smelled an unbearable stench of excrement, and suddenly I was on the roof, with the other birds, next to the hole I had come out of. Below were the three women, sitting, as if conversing, not noticing anything strange. But the dogs were barking furiously around them, circling and looking up at the roof, from where I was mocking them. I don't know how long all that lasted, but suddenly all the birds took flight, and I couldn't. I wanted to follow them, but my body couldn't. I was as if tied without ropes to that roof, condemned to a place in between the house in the village and the sky, perhaps. I heard the old woman say to me, without taking her hand off my head, "It's not time yet." And I woke up, even though I hadn't slept. I was in the chair, next to the others. The witch said something in her dialect, and I couldn't understand her anymore. The other woman translated: "The girl is one of us, an Aranguren..." My mother stammered something, said that my father had told her that his mother was known as a healer, but it had never bothered them; hundreds of women in villages everywhere have always done the

same. She didn't say, or know, anything more, really. My father had died, and I was supposed to have this baby. Somehow, it didn't bother me. I blamed no one but the sun and lust. My belly grew; the fetus's movements thrilled me without terrifying me.
Mara looked under the mattress. She found a bottle still a quarter full.
"When did you start drinking?" José asked.
-That's another story, noble knight.
He got up, somewhat weary of her always timely sarcasm, and went out on deck. He urinated slowly and deliberately toward the river, listening to the crystalline sound of the stream on the water, trying to catch a glimpse of Cahrué's body on the bank, and wondering about the almost sophisticated language Mara sometimes used. He returned to the bunk. She had finished the bottle.
- And what was happening in Roberto's mind meanwhile?
He was suffering, what else? His eye healed, but the guilt was killing him. He would see me and it would tear him apart inside; he would see my mother's gaze, always pious, and he would feel even more guilty. He worked day and night, sleeping no more than three hours, and even then we would hear him tossing and turning in bed and waking up screaming. When I was almost eight months pregnant, we learned from the neighbors that he had been going to church every day, for at least an hour, between jobs. They saw him talking to the priest at the parish of Luna almost all the time. Then one night we saw him arrive with the priest. The priest wasn't old; he must have been about the same age my father would have been. We received him with respect, but in complete silence. We knew what he had come to tell us. I had to get married or give the boy up. He was almost thirteen years old, and he was a disgrace and a bad example for the town. But what he didn't dare say was what everyone already knew: the real reason. There was a candidate for me, a twenty-year-old from a good family, hardworking, honest, and all that usual nonsense. He would save face and silence the bad opinions. "What did we care about public opinion!" I shouted, loud and clear. But all my brothers glared at me with hatred, and my mother silenced me. I already knew that no one wanted to deal with us. They only did it because of Roberto, because of his constant mea culpa, which tore even guilt itself apart, shredding it into meaningless rags in the face of everyone else's accusations. If I didn't accept, no one would have

anything to eat, least of all my child. When she was born, it was a girl. It was only a few days, but they were the only happy ones in those times. My brothers doted on her, and my mother fed her goat's milk because I had little milk to give her. Roberto looked different, without that bitterness in his eyes, but it was only when he looked at the girl. When he saw me, the guilt returned, and I think it was then that I saw in his eyes the desire to kill me. If during all those months I had managed to overcome suicide thanks to the priest, now that the fruit of his guilt was more beautiful than his seed, he began to blame me for everything. It was written all over his face, not on his lips. I would approach him and snatch the baby from his arms, and one day the priest came in and saw us in the middle of our struggle. He made the sign of the cross and separated us like two possessed people. He rushed the marriage to my suitor, but the problem now was that the young man didn't want to take responsibility for another man's child. His family was humble but very devout, and his parents had refused to accept a bastard child of incest. If he wanted to marry Mara, she had to prove her integrity by giving up the baby. That was the excuse, but I always believed it was Roberto who convinced Santiago not to accept my daughter. I knew it; I heard it in his nightly whispers, in his hidden phrases. Then Santiago Espinoza came to our house one day and told us all he wanted to go to America to try his luck. We all knew about emigration, and many had traveled alone or with their whole families. Good news arrived from time to time, but generally there was silence after they left. They said it was the land of opportunity, that they accepted all kinds of workers because the locals didn't want to work. At the gathering, he offered to take me with him if I wanted. But that night, when we were just a few meters from the house, where we usually met to talk and get to know each other better, he talked for almost an hour about the landscapes of Argentina. He even read me excerpts from letters from his brother Facundo, who had traveled to Buenos Aires a few months earlier. He was enthusiastic, and his joy was contagious. For a moment, I thought everything was going to be alright. I let him kiss me, but when he lifted my skirt and started touching me, I pulled away. He looked at me as if he were just realizing that he really had me in his hands. He threw me to the ground and covered my mouth. He was excited by my resistance; he called me a whore and many other things that hurt me more than the force,

because with Roberto there had been nothing but gentleness and desire. He dragged me to the river, but since I didn't want to walk, he beat me almost the entire way. On the bank, he cleaned my face. My clothes were already torn, so when he took me home in the morning, he threw me at my mother's feet and said he had caught me rolling around with a man. He would take me to America, he said, but without marriage and without a child.

"Do you think your brother orchestrated all of this?" José asked.

“When I saw the glory on Roberto’s face,” Mara replied, “the very instant they told him they would leave my daughter with him, I knew it was true. All bruised, I packed my suitcase. My other siblings didn’t want to say goodbye; my mother hugged me, weeping, her only words her usual whimpers. Roberto was holding my daughter in his arms. He let me kiss her, and as I left the house toward the road where Santiago’s cart was waiting to take us on the long journey to the port of Cádiz, I turned around and contemplated that atrocious scene for the last time in my life: the father and the daughter. My little Elsa.”

*

José had been awake almost all night, but then slept all morning. It must have been nine or ten when he opened his eyes. It was already hot, and the sun overwhelmed him, almost blinding him, when he went out on deck. Mara was helping the old man.

"We're trying to fix the steam engine. This clever old fellow knows a lot, even though he's always pretending to be lazy." She gave him a shove, meant as a friendly push, but it knocked the old man to the ground, since he was squatting. Mara laughed. "He's still drunk, but he'll sober up soon." She said nothing about the dead man, who was the old man's son, and the old man didn't seem to remember the previous night.

José saw him get up with a stupid smile, grab the tools and resume his work, which consisted of constantly hammering the iron of a kind of rusty boiler.

"I'm going for a swim," José said, and Mara, squatting beside the old man, watched him take off his trousers, rub his eyes, and plunge into the river. She stood up quickly and went to the riverbank, holding onto the wood as if she were trying to maintain a balance she had suddenly begun to lose: the mere thought of that man disappearing without her consent frightened her, indeed, disturbed her in a way she hadn't felt in many years.
"Don't go too far!" she called after him, because she could see him going downstream, getting closer to the bank. "I'll make you something to eat, and we'll go out this afternoon, if the old man finishes..."
José didn't hear her anymore, because he saw her turn around and return to her usual bad temper, venting it on the old man, no doubt threatening him not to leave the machine unattended. Where were they going, José wondered, but he didn't care as he swam slowly toward the shore where he had seen Cahrué disappear during the night. When he reached a clearing on the beach, he already felt cooler, and he stood in the shade of some trees, listening to the roar of the river and the cries of the early morning birds. There was an intense, almost intoxicating scent of flowers. Standing there, naked and looking toward the boat, he began to think that he had no choice but to stay with Mara, wherever she went, even helping her with her business, and perhaps, together, they could even make quite a bit of money. Mara was a rebellious, moody, violent spirit, but he had found, he was sure, a way to control her. He hadn't realized this until this morning, when he heard her from the side of the boat.
Then he heard footsteps on the dry leaves, and when he turned around he saw that Cahrué was looking at him, wide awake, with a clear gaze, and in his hands he held ropes made of woven leaves. José smiled.
"It's good to see you..." and he approached the boy. "What are those ropes for?"
-I fixed up an old canoe I found near here. I'm going south to Buenos Aires.
José looked at him with surprise; he seemed more than just upset, he was offended.
"But what's wrong with you? Is it because of the woman? Did you think we were going to leave you here?" He tried to minimize all those thoughts with his laughter and by placing his hands on the boy's shoulders, and then he stroked his head and then his face with its sparse beard.

-I realize that you must follow your path, and it seems to me that you have already found it. I understand very well; I realize that there is something between you, a bond that will only grow stronger later…
-Don't talk nonsense, you're just jealous…
Cahrué did not respond to that.
- And what are you going to do in Buenos Aires, if I may ask?
-To study, as you and Mrs. Altea recommended. You said I'm very capable of studying medicine, and that's what I'm going to do.
José started laughing so hard he had to sit down. He tried to speak, but he choked up from laughing at the boy's ideas.
-You're an idiot. Do you think they're going to accept you, you Indian and a black man?
He didn't see it coming, because he was still dazed from laughing. The boy jumped on him. Cahrué was agile and agile with his body, while José outweighed him and outgained experience. He flipped him over and pinned him to the ground with his arms and legs, as if staking him out. He looked at him for a while, trying to calm himself.
-You look like an Indian Christ, like the one you gave to Altea.
He thought of the crucifix she must have worn on her chest, the one Manuel must have been venerating every time he saw it. That crucifix, somehow, united them, through her, through Christ, through the boy… A kind of orgy that brought them all together in that vast country of deep jungles and rivers with hundreds of tributaries and interrupted streams, of exotic birds that sang morning hymns like at the morning masses in Cádiz, where the heat was, more than intoxicating, a kind of exact synthesis of decay and life: death and resurrection.
He brought his face close to Cahrué and kissed him. And suddenly, the almost midday was darkened by the fleeting passage of clouds, which in reality were as eternal as the suspension of time beneath the shadows that the trees lengthened with their sluggish branches. He turned Cahrué's body over, pressing him to the ground with his own. His face was next to the boy's, while his mouth blasphemed insults and obscenities into the Indian's ear: he called him Indian, he called him black, he called him faggot, he called him a fucking ignorant fool. But at the same time, sweat sprang from his skin like tears, and without ceasing his struggle, he penetrated him and finished with a stifled cry, because he felt both shame

and a satisfaction that he could not compare to anything. He knew that it had all been a subterfuge, a substitution, a body in imitation of another, an Indian soul that irremediably resembled, in wisdom and sarcasm, that other soul he truly missed.

When he let go and the boy fell face up on the beach, he slowly got up, looking at him without hatred and also without solace, and then walked away along the shore, among the branches that tried to sink into the bank. He got up and followed him. Cahrué reached the repaired canoe, climbed in, cast off the ropes, and began to paddle. He watched him drift downstream. He would undoubtedly do what he had set out to do. The others would tear him to pieces, body and soul, for a long time, but the boy was already a man who would rebuild himself as many times as necessary. The sun beat down on the river and the canoe, but Cahrué was part of the river, and therefore part of the sun, and he could not harm himself. He was a whole that would plunge headlong into the grand city, the concrete city with which he would collide, gnawing at the walls and entering the cloisters and classrooms. And he, like a snake, would know how to shed his skin to survive.

José sat in the mud beside some rotten branches. He saw the worms that recreated life from death, the same ones that were now crawling onto his skin, attracted by the sweat and salt that oozed from it. He lay on his back, letting them tickle him as they ascended, and it was then that the clouds, as eternal as the river, grew darker, and from among the trees that tangled above him, bats appeared. Perhaps they thought it was night, or perhaps it was just their usual routine, which he didn't know. While his soul was sinking into the mud, the bats flew below the high treetops, going back and forth, bumping into the trunks like stupid blind creatures, screeching. The flapping of wings, like beaten leather, was so intense that it hid the roar of the current, until the river became a river of wings, snaking through the air as if in the sky. He thought he saw in the black sky, now without branches to hide it, a wide river of bats with shapes and figures of numbers, perhaps an eight, or maybe a letter.

He fell asleep, because he was very tired. When he awoke, it must have been almost three in the afternoon. His body was covered in mud, but the worms had left him. The heat was unbearable, but there was no sun. It would soon rain torrentially, and he heard Mara's voice, calling him with a

distressed expression, urging him to return before the storm, but it was more of a plea than a warning. That woman missed him, and suddenly he felt a need for her, to hold her in his arms to draw from her body what she could never teach him, no matter how much she wanted to: the way to get what one needs, the way to keep things from dying, and above all, the precise configuration of power over others. Not the power of the flesh, but of the soul, the god he needed to attain because his own god demanded it: the fullness impelled him toward emptiness, saturated and weary, and the emptiness, embittered by eternal absence, demanded to be filled.
He swam out to the boat. Mara was waiting for him, her elbows resting on the wooden rail. When she saw him arrive, she ran to help him aboard, but soon began to reproach him for his lateness, with her usual sullenness. José, despite how unbearable her temper was, felt welcome. He expected to see her drunk, but she wasn't. While he dried himself off, she looked at him in silence.
"What about the engine repair?" she asked, as she dressed in the clothes the dead man had left behind. She had laid them out for him on the mattress.
"It's fixed now, but the old man wants to test it during the day; he's afraid the boiler will explode. It's just one of his quirks, I know him. Drunk as he is, he's the best mechanic on the river."
- Where are we going?
"I have a job in the tri-border area, with a guy I sometimes work with. I don't trust him much, but he helped Santiago and me a lot during the war."
- What kind of work?
-Taking girls to a brothel in Brazil. We pick them up in one town and take them to another. That's all.
-It seems very easy...
-He is, but Valverde is hiding things...
- Who?
"Valverde de Amusco is a Portuguese man who lives in Brazil. He owns land and has a noble family, but he leaves it all behind while he mingles with all sorts of criminals, like us." He looked at José sarcastically. "I'm not referring to you, Spanish gentleman."
- And when do we leave?
-Early tomorrow.

-I was thinking about my brother and sister-in-law. I wonder if they managed to get transportation to Buenos Aires?
-I don't think so, the next one south passes in a month.
José sat down on the straw mattress, looking towards the river.
-But don't worry, if they're smart they'll have boarded the ship going north to leave them in a town or city with a hotel, if they're as fussy as they seemed to me.
Joseph kept thinking, and said:
-I'd like to see if they're okay, if they need anything, after all, they're my family.
Mara looked at him suspiciously, but if he had returned after several hours away from the ship, she shouldn't worry now.
-We already passed that rest stop several kilometers downstream. Is the Indian going to accompany you?
José shook his head, lowered a canoe, and began to paddle. He knew Mara was watching him, that this woman had eyes all over her body. He remembered the story of his experience in Spain, that whole tale of witches, and he knew with certainty, as he watched the ripples he was pushing drift behind him and reflect Mara's figure, so many meters away, so contrary to the logic of ordinary physics.
It took him no more than an hour to reach the rest stop; it was the only clearing in the thick vegetation along the shore. He tied up his canoe and walked along the beach, avoiding the ruined pier, until he reached a small house. It was empty, but there were remnants of candles and kerosene lamps. He went outside and called out, but no one answered. He decided to wander around the area, but soon he came to the edge of the jungle, thick and dense, and as evening was beginning to fall, he decided not to go any further. However, he heard the sound of a cart from the interior, and two different voices. Soon he saw an old man and a boy appear among the trees in a rickety cart pulled by a scrawny bay horse. When they saw him, they stopped, and the old man asked him:
- Are you looking for something, boss?
-Good afternoon, I was looking for a couple who were waiting for transport to Buenos Aires.
The old man laughed.
- The Spaniards? They left this morning on the “Juan Manuel de Rosas”.

The two laughed like fools and said goodbye to José. They headed towards the beach, where an old barge awaited them, anchored next to the pier. José sat down on the floor. What was he going to do? Manuel was gone, and he didn't even have Cahrué anymore. They had both fled, and he didn't know who had scared whom away. He only had Mara, a kind of soulmate, who, more than love, gave him a kind of ecstasy bordering on existentialism. He saw in her something he possessed, something that sometimes weakened: a fearless horror. That strength whose absence made him feel lost. But Manuel, good God, he needed him. He was part of his body, and he had been amputated the day Christ, the Church, or Altea, whoever it was, had taken him away. And if he couldn't have Manuel, then he would be his son. Because he knew that Altea's son was his, José Menéndez Iribarne's. Manuel's son was his son. Both brothers had the same child. Good God, José thought, what will we name this child? Jesus, perhaps?

He got up and, without realizing it, plunged into the thicket, following the narrow path the cart had taken. It was getting dark, and the shadows of the trees gave the place a nocturnal feel. He tripped over something and fell to his knees on a pile of stones. It was a recent grave. He left it and reached the dock, where the old man and the boy were about to set out onto the river.

"Do they fish at night?" he asked.

-No, boss. We're going to town to buy a few things; we'll take advantage of the night to get there early.

-But it looks like there's going to be a storm.

They laughed in their usual way, and did not answer.

"Hey, there's a recent grave over there," he said, pointing towards the inner path.

-It's Espinoza the cripple, his wife killed him a few days ago.

He watched them sail upriver, the enormous, dark clouds seemingly unfazed by the flimsy barge. He already knew something more about Mara, but it didn't surprise him; instead, it drew him closer to her, as if it were inevitable. He climbed into the canoe and returned to the ship. Night had fallen, and she greeted him with dinner ready. She was somewhat drunk; she couldn't have avoided it no matter how hard she'd tried. But there was a hint of sadness in her face, so different from the carefree joy she

displayed when she was truly intoxicated. She was in a man's hands again, he read in her expression, a lament, but also a joy. In the morning, they would set sail for Brazil, following the ship whose name was similar to her brother's. That's why, after making love just once, he slept peacefully until nearly dawn, when bats began to flutter in front of his face, hitting him with their wings and crashing into his bed, while he flailed, desperate to get them off him.

Beside him, Mara watched, not daring to wake him, for she knew all too well that interrupted nightmares become reality. But seeing him so furiously injure his face, she couldn't help but place her one hand on José's face. He opened his eyes, startled, his gaze filled with fear, with pure terror. She knew she had surrendered herself to a doomed man, and she lay down beside him again, caressing him.

THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE LANDS OF THE DOGS

3

Altea woke up feeling nauseous. She touched her forehead, drenched in sweat, as were her chest and back. It was a cold sweat, and she wondered if perhaps she had a fever. During her years on the coast, she had suffered several infections, but her body had dealt with them as one deals with a minor inconvenience. An afternoon lying down, even a whole day, had been all it took to recover. Today, however, she knew it wasn't that. It was the pregnancy, of course. And since it was her first time, she had the fears she had been determined to ignore before leaving the village. How could she, a grown woman, who had helped the women of the village give birth, even taught the teenage girls what they should know about sex, be afraid? But the truth was, she was fooling herself: they knew more than she could ever teach them. For those women, it was commonplace, and they giggled

behind their backs when she spoke to them so worriedly and seriously. His gestures, which were meant to be merely realistic, came across as obscene, and the words he used were so colloquial that in the end the women laughed and he had no choice but to smile and hide his humiliation.
Now she would have liked to ask them something, but she was alone in the middle of that river she had pretended to hate because it represented her failure. Coming from Spain had already been naive of her, trusting Manuel, stupid, and now the tragedy of the night of the rites had been added to that. The child was a tragedy in himself. A cross to bear, as she couldn't help but associate him; she too had Catholic worship ingrained in her soul, chiseled into the deepest rocks of her psyche. “Oh, Psyche,” she murmured, “who will be able to analyze you better and more deeply than a woman? The problem is that our wisdom is intuition, and we will never be able to explain it. And they, men, who possess words, will not be able to find the right ones either, because they will never understand the *crux* of the matter. For them, the great themes: God and death; for us: the flesh and dissatisfaction.”
He stood up, wiping the sweat from his brow with that single, soiled sheet. It smelled of filth, of Manuel's semen. He held the sheet over his face for a moment, remembering the night and all the rage he had felt. He was another man, yet he was the same. He smelled of José, but he could never tell him that, unless he wanted to kill him. They were one, how could he have fought to deny it so vehemently, to silence it his whole life until that silence became a scream that was now awakening?
She would have to bathe in the river, she told herself. She put on the dress she had worn all those days. She left the cabin and began walking along the path toward the beach. The dog had gone, perhaps with Manuel, but where were he and the captain? She walked slowly, tired. Her lower abdomen ached; Manuel had hurt her. She felt dizzy, and the sun was already beginning to intensify the humidity by the river. She heard voices; it was them. She looked toward the ruined pier, but there was no one there. The voices and barking were coming from the beach to the left, hidden among the willows that lapped at the water.
She approached, trying not to make a sound, checking if they were far enough away that they wouldn't see her when she slipped in. She moved some branches and saw them both sitting on the sand, staring at the river,

naked and talking. Max had seen her, but he didn't make any effort to go looking for her. He was a man, too, and shared that carefree sociability. Who could know what they were talking about? Not about the time wasted in that abandoned port, not about the lack of supplies until the ship that would take them to Buenos Aires arrived. They were probably talking about their women, scolding them as one scolds the one without whom life is impossible, until that one is gone. The day before, it would have seemed very strange to see Manuel like that, naked next to a near-stranger, carefree and so expressive as he spoke. But after that night, she wouldn't wonder who he was anymore, but what he was.
Then he slipped in the mud, and they turned around.
- Altea!
Manuel took less than a minute to get dressed and reach her, where she lay on her back on the floor. He helped her up.
- Were you going to take a bath? Now you have no excuse.
She heard Captain Mendoza's laughter; he had just arrived. Both men looked at her mockingly, but without irony, which she would have preferred, because irony implies intelligence on both sides. Even the dog barked happily, circling her, sniffing her dirty dress. But she neither smiled nor said a word. The men broke off their jocularity, adopting a solemn air that contrasted sharply with the splendid morning.
"This afternoon we'll set sail north with Captain Mendoza," Manuel said.
Altea looked at him, astonished. "We won't return to Europe; we'll try our luck in the north, with the boy."
-I'm not going to follow you, not after what happened.
"If you'll allow me," interrupted Mendoza, who already sensed the storm brewing over family matters. "There's no ship to Buenos Aires for at least a month. It's impossible for them to stay here. Besides, I can leave them in some port or town until they make a final decision."
"It already is..." Altea began to say, but Manuel grabbed her arm tightly and stared at her as if she were a phallus that was not yet satisfied.
She looked down at her arm; he let go and walked back to the cabin. Altea watched him go; he wasn't walking upright or briskly, but with his head down. Max followed him.
Only Mendoza remained.

"I see you've convinced my husband..."—and she herself knew that such sarcasm was too cheap to come from her lips.
"On the contrary, Mrs. Iribarne, I think he's convinced me. You know my wife and son are on the ship. She has a peculiar temperament, and I fear the influence she's having on Ariel. I've had the pleasure of observing her, ma'am, and I think you and my wife have much in common, and I thought perhaps you'd be a good advisor to her."
"Captain, if we're so similar, I doubt I can help you. You've probably noticed that I'm reserved, not outgoing."
"But yours is part of your nature, therefore it's flexible and adapts to situations. Natacha's is part of a learned reaction, like a wall she built for herself; the only alternative is to tear it down or abandon it."
She listened attentively as he took one of her hands. Perhaps Manuel was watching, hidden among the branches, and she was pleased by this unexpected courtship. But surely it was all in her imagination. There could be no jealousy where there was no love, and she could never be sure whether what Manuel felt was love or despair.
She withdrew her hand, and without answering, disappeared into the willows toward where they had been. She didn't look back to confirm that Mendoza had left. She didn't hear the footsteps, and if he remained watching her as she undressed and plunged into the river, he must have had the stillness of a statue. Altea laughed at herself; if everyone else was doing it, why shouldn't she? After all, she was becoming a tragedy of her own making, or degenerating into a parody, and soon to fall, later on, into a poor imitation. If she wished to preserve her dignity, she had to pretend she didn't know what she knew, what women had been accustomed to doing for a long time.
When she got out of the river and dressed, she found only Max, who was waiting for her, sitting calmly with his ears down. She greeted him, and he wagged his tail. While she dried herself and dressed, she spoke to him, and the dog seemed to understand everything perfectly. The look in his eyes confirmed it, and she would have liked him to tell her what the men had discussed that morning. She asked him, stroking his head. But his silence, of course, was absolute. Not a glance, not a sound, nothing in his body revealed what she nevertheless sensed.

*

In the afternoon, as the sun began to dip below the horizon over the trees of the west bank, the ship's shadow slowly advanced across the width of the river. When Altea looked up after the glare of the hot afternoon sun had faded, she stood lost in thought, her gaze fixed on the hull of the enormous vessel, which nevertheless seemed incongruous with the vastness of those river waters, so peculiar, so capricious in their twists and turns, branches and streams that branched off and rejoined the main channel, sometimes so wide that the opposite bank was barely visible, other times so narrow that a swim was all it took to cross. And the vegetation formed a kind of frame befitting the magnificence of the ship. The dense trees were a sort of wall of dark green, almost gray as the light faded, and at times, she thought she saw in those images the castles of old Europe.

In the boat that had been sent from the ship to the beach to pick them up were she, Manuel, Mendoza, the rower, the dog, and the trunk with their belongings. She watched the old pier, the beach, and the cabin where they had spent at least ten days recede into the distance. She no longer knew what day of the week or month it was; she had lost track. She asked Manuel in a low voice because she was ashamed to admit it.

-It is six o'clock in the afternoon on January 1, 1891.

She looked at him, puzzled, not by the precision men liked to boast about regarding maps and time, but by the fact that the year, even the decade, had changed without her knowing. She thought of the different night she had spent with Manuel, of the change he had undergone, and she was not surprised, then, by either the time or the place.

The ship's shadow had already enveloped them in its chill. A wind had risen from the southeast, stirring the treetops and churning the water, making the boat lurch slightly. But now alongside the hull to leeward, the boat managed to stop, and several ropes were thrown overboard. The rower and the captain tied them with knots to various hooks on the boat. Manuel observed the knot-tying technique for a few minutes, and then, on his own initiative, began to assist them. Altea couldn't stop staring at him, astonished but also determined not to give in to her resentment. She was

ready to leave him, for good, and the temper he was now displaying made him seem like a kind of beast she didn't want to know.
The boat began to be raised slowly, sometimes lurching or tilting, and the men laughed at Altea's frightened face. She ended up laughing too, when she was safely level with the gunwale, the turbulent waters below crashing against the hull, a wall of old wood, eaten away by algae and shells. Manuel grabbed her and carried her to the deck. She clung to his neck, terrified, smelling the scent of sweat and dirty water on her husband's beard. She was already standing, but couldn't bring herself to let go, watching the many crew members moving about, and several other people who were undoubtedly passengers. There were two tall, useless masts, and an immense smokestack from which white steam billowed. The roar of the steam engine wasn't as loud as she had expected, but a muffled rumble buried inside the hull, something that gave her a sense of threat, like an imminent explosion.
Manuel mocked her and forced her to let go, but not before slapping her on the bottom. Altea looked around, embarrassed, and saw many knowing smiles, even from the women, except for one who was a few meters away, by the castle bridge. She was tall and slender, dressed in black. Her hands were clasped in front of her body, her dark hair, though tied at the nape of her neck, whipped in the wind in strands that partially obscured her face. Altea heard the boat crash onto the deck, the men shouting orders to one another, and laughing. Captain Mendoza offered only a few words of advice as he watched attentively; everyone knew what to do and needed no supervision. Then he approached them and apologized for the inconvenience of the boarding, offering to take them to their cabins so they could rest and change. Manuel and Altea walked across the deck, the men making way for them, and the passengers, who were simply men and women from the river villages, regarded them with a certain respect. “They are distinguished Spaniards,” she heard them mutter. Altea’s worn dress still held its distinction, and Manuel’s trousers and shirt, with remnants of ruffles at the neck revealing his chest, gave him a pirate-like air, but his overgrown beard and pale, sad eyes hinted at a dark depth. She appeared haughty and self-assured, he a restless creature.
They reached the woman they had seen earlier.
-Natacha, I'd like to introduce you to Mr. Menéndez Iribarne and his wife.

They shook hands with the woman whose palms were dry and calloused. The sleeve of her black dress reached her wrist, adorned with delicate lace. Altea recognized it as a silk dress. It had a high neckline and a long skirt. The lace was the same on the neckline, the bodice, and the hem of the skirt.
The woman barely smiled. She was very beautiful, but the skin of her face, naturally white, had taken on a somewhat ochre hue from the river sun. That color didn't suit her elusive face and the brownish shadow of her eyes. Then she said:
- Why are you looking at me like that, Mr. Iribarne?
Manuel seemed to awaken from his brief reverie.
-I apologize, but your features seemed familiar to me.
"Perhaps from our old and beloved Europe, I've heard of your family, your lands, your connections with the Holy Church." And in those words there was no irony, but admiration. It was almost the only time there was a hint of pleasure on his face, and not the treacherous labyrinth of multiple meanings into which his words would habitually fall from that afternoon onward.
But Manuel's thoughts were different. The woman's face and complexion, with the dying afternoon shadow on the deck, the approaching clouds, and the damp wind from the riverside trees, reminded him of the effigies of Christ carved in colonial churches. Those bodies, more deformed than realistic, were the work of artisans steeped in the twisted ideas the Jesuits had tried to instill in the natives. But those images of Christ with bulging eyes, white as if in a state of ecstasy, with ochre faces scarred by smallpox, with limbs as thin as old ropes, nailed to crosses of floss silk wood—these were the images he could never eradicate, because that was the Christ of those lands, one the Inquisition was meant to abolish. And then he felt a pain within him that made him lower his head and touch his chest.
Natacha understood. She reached out to barely touch the back of his hand.
"You are suffering..." he said.
Mendoza led him to the cabin. They were left alone, and Natacha said bitterly:
"I already know my husband's intentions; he thinks women are weak... they are the weak ones..." And she looked at the entrance to the staircase that descended to the bridge below deck.

Altea knew it wouldn't be easy dealing with that woman. But she couldn't help but respond; something about her provoked her.
-They are while they are in love with us, but as soon as we turn them against us, they are worse than carnivorous animals.
Natacha led her to the cabin. They descended the narrow, dimly lit staircase. They reached a short corridor, passing between barrels along the walls. A faint glow emanated from the last door; it was the light from the two lamps Manuel and Mendoza had brought down. Altea found her husband lying on the bed, the light shining directly on his face and heaving chest. Mendoza sat there, wiping the sweat from his brow with a rag.
"Where's a hatch?" Altea asked, feeling along the walls.
"Don't open it, the cold wind will make it worse," Mendoza warned. "Let him sweat it out. I think it's an infectious fever; one of my men had it before."
- Isn't there a doctor?
"Dear Madam, please excuse us, but here we are all our own doctors. If there is one, it would be some abortionist who cares about nothing more than anonymity and a daily meal."
Natacha gave a kind of silent start that the others noticed. Mendoza didn't seem to care, but it made Altea wonder why that woman was on that ship, and then she felt a hand touch her neck. She hadn't seen it approach, but she smelled the scent of bitter almonds that she had already noticed when she approached Natacha on deck. Her face was very close, and only the halo of light enveloped them as if in a cramped theater, almost a chamber with damp walls where they were both condemned to remain standing together, smelling and hating each other.
Natacha now held the native cross in her hand.
“She’s very beautiful,” he said. Altea didn’t answer. “If you’ll allow me…”
And without waiting for a reply, he began to unravel the crochet hook of the chain. He moved away from her and approached the bed. Beside Manuel, she was like some kind of mystical apparition, because the light from the lamps seemed to illuminate only the important scene. Altea wondered if God was directing this drama, but in the corners of the cabin there were nothing but ambiguous sounds: the river water, human voices, the creaking of the hull’s wood, the hum of the machinery, or the groans of some hidden demon that metamorphosed into each or all of those sounds.

Natacha placed the cross against Manuel's chest. He shuddered as if from something cold, but the cross still retained the warmth of Altea's skin. Or was it Natacha's cold hands? But then he began to calm down, and opened his eyes. He was tearful and weak, just as he had been when he had left Spain, defeated and resigned. Then he began to look around and flail his arms in the air.

"What's wrong, Manuel?" Altea asked. Natacha signaled her to be quiet. Mendoza remained silent; it wasn't wise to contradict her.

They all heard the flapping and the banging on the hull. From above came the laughter of the men and the muffled shouts of some women. There was running on deck and doors slamming shut. Then, the captain's laughter, as he explained:

"They're bats. Every now and then, as darkness falls, they come out in flocks that crash into the ship. In the morning, a few of them turn up dead on deck, and some of my men roast them for lunch."

But Manuel was whipping the air with his arms.

"He's delirious from the fever; we need to give him plenty of water. We have to take care of his heart; that's what a doctor from Buenos Aires recommended."

Now they were sitting on the bed, one on each side of Manuel, trying to hold his arms back so he wouldn't hurt himself on the metal edges and the glass of the lamps.

"When will those bats leave?" Altea asked.

-In one or two hours. We're used to it by now.

He saw Natacha's disapproving look. He sensed the captain's nonchalance. Manuel, however, saw bats inside, fluttering beneath the ceiling, shaking the lights and casting shadows with their wings. He must have been feeling the membranes brush against his face because he was trying to hit himself to get them off.

-Captain, please help us restrain him.

Manuel's eyes were wide with terror. The cross swung precariously on his chest as he tried to stand up, and they could no longer hold him down. Mendoza caught him before he fell and laid him down, but Manuel thrashed about, sometimes hitting him, and the captain spoke to him like a drunken old friend. He was sweating profusely—that was the expression he used when he began to undress him and order dry cloths to be brought.

-Darling, have them bring ice and more rags.
Natacha got out. Altea was trembling. Manuel clutched his throat, as if he were choking. Then Altea began to feel along the walls, searching for the hatch. She, too, felt like she was suffocating in that place. She found the opening, and after several attempts, managed to open it. The sound of turbulent water rushed in, intense, along with the fresh, damp, and heavy air. Mendoza reprimanded her.
- But he's drowning!
- And he'll keep doing it until his throat clears!
The bats came in. They circled the cabin, bumping into them and the furniture, breaking the lamps, and plunging it into darkness. Mendoza groped around to close the hatch, but tripped over Altea. She clung to him, holding onto his shirt and trying to cover herself. He hugged her and covered her with a sheet, then closed the hatch, but the bats kept circling in the darkness. They heard footsteps, perhaps Manuel's. Yes, they were his; she knew them. He was pacing, lost, with a choking sound in his throat. Then a thud on the floor, and suddenly light came in from the doorway. Three men and Natacha entered, and the light revealed Altea clinging to Mendoza. They let go, and Mendoza helped Manuel up. His head was bleeding from hitting the table. He was still choking.
Natacha arranged several lamps, and the light was enough to illuminate the entire room. Altea observed the cabin, spacious and furnished with antiques. There was a sense of old-world grandeur, lingering traces of bygone eras and places. But now she only felt Natacha's gaze on the back of her neck, even though they were no longer looking at each other. That woman's expression was a kind of hook that drew attention to her. Constant recrimination was her way of life, which is why Altea now understood Captain Mendoza's concern.
The men had scared away or killed the remaining bats. They brought ice and placed it on the bed and around Manuel. Mendoza put ice on the body, almost covering it, and he began to shiver and turn white.
Captain Mendoza then rubbed his face with his hands, and when he separated them, he said:
-Julio, give me your knife.
Julio was the second in command.

The women then saw Mendoza make a small incision in Manuel's throat, between the bones of his trachea. Julio had taught him that; it was necessary to know everything when there was no doctor, or when the one there was was an old drunk from the rivers who treated prostitutes or removed bullets from smugglers. Mendoza looked at the man several times, as if seeking advice. Altea knew it now. What the captain had said about the doctors was referring to this man who was his right-hand man on the ship. She observed Julio's weathered face, his wrinkled hands, trembling with a tremor he tried to hide by always clutching something. It wasn't his style to stand still, observing, and now the captain needed him.
-Maximum….
Altea heard the captain's first name for the first time; the other man spoke it, and it sounded warm and friendly. She imagined the name in Natacha's voice, and then immediately in her own , spelling it out with her head resting against his body and protected by his arms. Covered with a sheet as if they were in bed.
Manuel's throat bled, and the blood spread onto the ice, which absorbed it and turned red, until it stopped, and Manuel's chest expanded for the first time in a long while. His breathing became wheezy, but his face had regained its natural color, and he breathed with relief. They removed the ice. Julio whispered something in the captain's ear. Mendoza placed an arm around his shoulders, and they both stared at Manuel. Every now and then, he made a gesture as if to shoo away a bat, but he was calmer now.
-We should leave him with someone to look after him tonight.
"We'll stay," Natacha said.
"You don't need to do it, ma'am. I'm his wife." She sensed in the captain's eyes that he understood her sarcasm.
"But you're pregnant, ma'am, you're exhausted after so many days of misfortune, think of your child. I can't leave you alone," Natacha replied.
Altea thought about the cross she had taken from him to give to Manuel, when the bats had begun to arrive and she had started to suffocate. But now she was breathing better thanks to the captain, and the cross remained on her chest.
The men left. The two women stayed. When the door closed, each did what she thought she had to do, in silence. They looked like two clockwork dolls,

but they were like two universes locked in the same room, ready to annihilate each other.

*

The bats have returned. They circle and circle, casting shadows between the lamps. They spin and collide with the walls. Their wings lash my face. The screech is shrill, even more so when they pass near my ears. They shriek and lament, and complain. Because everything hurts them. The room I'm in is very cramped, and the women talk and complain, and the men sigh and lament. One of them has placed a cross on my chest, and now I'm suffocating, my chest tightening, constricting to the proportional dimensions of this room. A universe full of bats spinning in their eternal orbits, but breaking the symmetry of the spheres, causing the collision of the star-bats.

A face appears before mine. The face of the crucified Christ, in the image carved in an old missionary church in the village of Toba. A village yet to be founded or named, but in which we live like gods fallen from the sky, arriving in great ships across wide rivers that rise from the great peaks: the sky is the highest mountain, and God the all-seeing, all-watchful condor. He is one and many, a race of condors that hunts all, except bats. They return, like cross-dressing lawyers, to fill the lives of strange men, solitary men, those who go against the grain, the outsiders, with stark pronouncements. For these are the men with twisted demons: angels always on a war footing.

The face of the crucifix is the face of a bat, round, almost a black cherub, and its wings are spread out and nailed to the adobe cross of a poor missionary church, smelling of urine on the walls and semen behind the presbytery, of rancid wine and the emaciated flesh of some dead dog.

And the only man I trust approaches me and plunges a knife into my throat. Betrayal is that: a weapon in the hands of a man who obeys a woman. They order him to do it; they are the resentful virgins of my cursed heaven. An icy hell that makes me tremble, surrounded by icebergs and alone, always

alone at both poles of the world. Standing on a drifting iceberg, unmoving, destined to never melt: the day Altea's voice transforms into the tone of abdication and defeat.
She speaks with words like sharp edges, surrounded by ice. And the other answers, riddled with spiders that weave the house in which she will live the rest of her days. Both ignore me no more than necessary; they already know about the bats, and are untouched by their prophecies.

*

Manuel has fallen asleep, at least outwardly, though he wonders if perhaps he isn't lucid beneath that mask of pain. Like the images of saints, or perhaps more accurately, like the faces of priests during confession. That was what Manuel should have been, that would have made him happy. But if the path of God is indeed strewn with thorns, he told himself, perhaps this was Manuel's Calvary: Altea and America.
They had removed his last wet clothes and dressed him in the captain's bedclothes. It hadn't bothered her that Natacha had seen her husband naked; she behaved like a devoted nurse. Every new detail she noticed about her—the way she painstakingly dried his sweat, the way she spoke to him softly, took his pulse, and paid attention to every sound or movement he made, even when she sat with her hands in her lap and her eyes closed —her ears were hypersensitive instruments that picked up on the irony with which Altea began to speak to her.
-You are very experienced in caring for the sick. Have you studied any science?
Natacha looked at her with disdain, but decided to ignore the ill intent.
-None of that, I was forced to take care of my father for many years, there in Warsaw.
- And why is she accompanying her husband? It's no life for a woman of her class, no matter how many comforts the ship has.
"Because my son is already fifteen years old, and he insisted, with Máximo's permission, on accompanying him to learn the trade. I don't

intend to allow it, if I can prevent it, besides, I would die in Santa Fe far away from him."
"I hope to meet your son soon," Altea said.
-She's already met my husband…
- Are they very similar?
On the contrary, they are very different. What I meant was…
-I understood what he meant.
They remained silent for a couple of hours. It must have been two in the morning. Natacha was still rigid in her chair. Altea was lying in bed. Manuel cleared his throat, and the bandage on his throat became stained with blood. Natacha brought a new bandage, and Altea changed it.
"He doesn't have a fever anymore," she said. "But look how he's still moving his hands. He thinks there are still bats around."
"They're still in his head. Going further north won't help. It'll only get hotter and the vermin wilder. If I were you, I'd go back to Europe. If I could, I'd take my son, but I'd only make him hate me if I kept him away from Maximus."
"I will return, no matter how much Manuel wants to stay. I have decided to separate."
-But in his state…
Altea sighed deeply, her eyes clouded over, and before that woman who looked more like a spider, she said aloud, for the first time:
-I was raped, this child is not his.
Natacha stared at her, seemingly not even breathing. Altea enjoyed shocking that prudish, rigid woman. She felt confident. She got out of bed and sat in the chair next to the other woman.
-Don't look at me like that, I know you'll consider me a prostitute, especially for confessing it when nobody asked me.
Natacha got up and went to the bed. She sat down and stroked Manuel's forehead.
“I understand your husband. It must be cruel what he’s going through. I felt it when I shook his hand when they arrived. For me, it was a bad feeling, but for him, it was like stepping into an undying anguish. Yes, I’m very religious, so I understand those who have given themselves to Christ in soul, but not in body. You know what? Nuns are called brides of Christ, so what should priests be called? Friends, perhaps… friends also have their

intimacy, if there’s true trust. And blind trust is very similar to true faith. You marry Christ in body and soul, or you’re not married at all. Anything halfway is adultery.”

Altea went to turn off two lamps; the one that remained was enough for the rest of the night. She saw Natacha adjusting the cross on Manuel's chest, and then touching his chest. Did she think he was Christ, perhaps? Manuel was bleeding like Christ on the cross, and breathing with difficulty, as the Gospels describe. His face was wise but sad, his beard long, his curly hair like a crown of thorns. Once, long before, when they were planning to have children, before coming to America, he had told her that he would have liked to name their first son Jesus.

- Are you Catholic, Natacha? Or Orthodox?

- Catholic, of course! I'm baffled by your ignorance of my country.

- And why did he come to America?

"The Cossacks killed my father in the uprising of 1970. We had nothing to do with it, but they wiped out all the old Polish families. Some left everything, or took what they could the year before. My father wanted to stay; it had taken him a lifetime of work to maintain what had been in our family for two generations: the factory, the house, the farm, the hunting dog kennel… Good heavens, so many things! Our home was Poland, and he wasn't about to abandon it."

Altea was left thinking about the dog breeding business. She remembered that Manuel's family, and especially Manuel himself, had been involved in that activity.

The Menéndez Iribarne family also bred dogs. Manuel really enjoyed that, but by the time we got engaged, my father-in-law had already decided to sell everything.

Natacha gave him an intelligent look, while still touching Manuel's chest.

- Did you know that this cross has very special virtues?

-A boy from the town where I taught gave it to me.

-His family may have taught him, but he created it himself. It's something between what we call folk healing and an exact science.

- What are you talking about?

-It depends on the proportions of the cross and the circle that surrounds it. If you place it on a piece of paper and draw a circle connecting its four points, you won't get a circle, of course, but an oval. But if you connect only

three points, and use Christ's feet for the fourth, you will get a perfect circle. The two half-lines will then give you the number Pi, the infinite number.
- But doesn't all that cancel out with the oval, which is the only certainty? What is the only certainty? Can't every point on any line serve as either an end or a beginning? Just because a line has an end, does that mean it's the end of the line or its beginning? Every oval formed by each point used will overlap with the circle of eternity. Each oval, each orbit, represents our life —sometimes slow, sometimes fast, sometimes abrupt in its turns. But all of them overlap with the perfect circle of Christ's life. We can touch it, but we almost never do. It's like the orbits of the planets; sometimes they're closer to the sun, sometimes farther away.
- “This is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by the sun of York” - Altea recited.
-Only Shakespeare could have expressed it so poetically.
- And what does the cross have to do with Manuel?
- Good heavens! She recites Shakespeare, but all she can think of is being sarcastic.
-That's right, I'm just a woman…
Natacha felt the distance again.
The cross is yours, you will know…
At dawn, Mendoza entered the cabin. Max followed him and climbed onto the bed, licking Manuel's face. Altea was asleep and woke up with the dog's paws on top of her.
"Stop it, Max!" she said, but Manuel was awake and speaking softly to the dog. Mendoza stared at them as Julio came in with a tray of breakfast. Altea looked at the coffee cups, the cookies, the cheese. It had been years since she'd been served such things. She knew she was touched, but she was determined not to reveal it. She looked for Natacha, but she was gone. She thanked Mendoza, and he left with Julio and closed the door.
They were left alone: she, Manuel, and Max. The cross still hung on his chest as she fed him spoonfuls of coffee, but Manuel grumbled and wanted to get up. They both laughed as Max received cookies, his gaze fixed on her each time he finished one. That morning they heard the sound of the steam engine running at full power. And they felt the boat moving upstream. They

didn't know where, but in that precious moment of the morning of the second day of the new year, it didn't seem important.

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By mid-January they had already passed Goya and were heading for the city of Corrientes. But on the right bank there was a town called Lavalle, where goods and passengers disembarked and embarked, and the captain had some business to conduct. Manuel wasn't interested in exploring the place. Altea had said she wanted to be on dry land, even if only for a few hours; she was already feeling too dizzy and nauseous.
"Go see the captain. You can help him as his secretary, if you feel up to it, of course." Manuel wasn't good with irony, which is why his malice was so sharply hurtful, and he rarely used it. Altea didn't respond with words, but by doing what she knew would upset him.
Natacha saw them go down to the dock together, he in his usual suit, carrying the saber she loathed, and with that cordiality written all over his face. She was on his arm, serious and respectable, as if she were his wife. Manuel and Natacha stayed on the boat, and Ariel shared lunch and dinner with them. By almost midnight, they hadn't returned.
"They will spend the night at the house of Don Fermín Valente, the one from the hardware store," said Natacha, sitting at the dining room table. The ship still retained its original 18th-century layout for the larger crew, when it had been designed and its construction begun: private cabins, the ballroom now used as a storeroom, and the dining room, which Natacha insisted on preserving as it had been because it reminded her of the good times with her father in their homeland. The ceiling was adorned with gold moldings, and a chandelier with twenty lights hung there, though only a quarter of them were illuminated. The maid who cooked and brought them their meals was an old slave who had escaped from a plantation in Brazil and whom Mendoza's parents had taken in at their ranch in Santa Fe. Young Máximo was her favorite, which is why she had gone with him when he bought the ship.
"But we'll go near Brazil, Tomasa," Mendoza had told her.

-It doesn't matter, child, you will protect me.
- Or is it that you miss your homeland?
The old woman shrugged, without answering. She knew it was a risk for her to be recognized, but the ties to the land were always stronger for people like her.
Tomasa paced back and forth from the kitchen, while the silence between the three of them grew deeper. Ariel listlessly stirred his plate, because he could see that Manuel, with whom he had been getting along so well lately, was angry, even though he tried to hide it. And his mother sat rigidly, her hands on the table, not taking a bite.
Go to bed, son. It's too late to keep waiting...
Manuel threw his silverware onto the porcelain plate. Natacha didn't scold him. Ariel had noticed that his mother's rigid character had softened, become more flexible, and he even thought he detected a smile on her face when she spoke to or simply looked at Manuel.
Ariel loved his father, admired him, really. That was the right word: that upbringing that made him address even the lowest-ranking subordinate as if they were not his equal, but his superior, and yet no one dared disrespect or disobey him. Captain Mendoza's face was sincere, manly, and cordial, and in his eyes, he could read a message that not even a murderer could resist. He had heard him speak of the only battle in which he had participated, during the revolution of 1874. He had supported Mitre, and had even served as part of his personal guard during those times in Buenos Aires. He had killed some men, he had been wounded, but he recounted those episodes without attaching much importance to them.
"He who is in the middle of a battlefield doesn't think what he's doing is important. That's left to the generals, only for those who seek glory as if it were a woman. But she eludes you, and sometimes, when you catch her, it lasts only a short time, just long enough to penetrate her. Afterwards, we have to bathe with plenty of water; the smell is so bitter..."
That's how she had spoken to her son just a year before, when they were still at the Santa Fe ranch. His mother had gone to bed, and the two of them, taking advantage of those moments when Natacha's watchful eyes had closed, walked to the grove that, in the moonlight, seemed illuminated like a bluish dome, the rays of which penetrated the treetops only surreptitiously. They sat down on the leaf litter, the captain lighting his

pipe and sharing it with his son. He watched him smoke calmly, as if it weren't the first time.
-You'll have to chew eucalyptus leaves to freshen your breath when we get home. Your mother will scold us both.
Ariel, with hair so blond it almost looked white under the moon, thin, almost scrawny, didn't answer. He knew he was weak and not very intelligent; the only thing he knew about himself was the strange ability, at his age, to understand others. Everything made him feel sorry for himself: his mother's perpetual tension and bitterness, his father's sad lethargy. He saw that only Captain Mendoza was happy: his father, transformed into a soldier and sailor, smiled and boasted of his joy and his physique, stroked his beard, and wet his hair with river water, letting the curly hair dry in long waves streaked with the first hints of gray. His father's body was admirable, not too tall or muscular, but strong and well-proportioned. So different from his own… where had he gotten such fair hair and white skin, such blue eyes, and above all, such a thin body that embarrassed him? Even his name was so ethereal.
"Father, I would like to accompany you on your next trip; I want to learn your trade." And as she said this, she glanced quickly at his body, arms, legs, and chest.
Mendoza understood. He felt proud, and he no longer cared about his wife's certain refusal. He put an arm around Ariel's shoulders.
-You're going through an age that all men have gone through. I was as skinny as you too, but we all change after that.
-But father, this blond hair, the skin, your skin is coppery and your hair couldn't be blacker.
Mendoza couldn't help but laugh.
"You inherited your skin from your mother; she's as white as milk, even though she has dark hair—just look at her green eyes. As for the blond hair, I think it comes from your maternal grandparents."
- So I have nothing from you?
Captain Máximo Mendoza remained thoughtful. Several times he was about to begin a sentence, but he immediately aborted it before it was too late to erase it.
"You inherited a love for the sea or the river; that's more important than physical traits. It's what will make you happy if you know how to use it

properly. I'll speak with your mother. You'll come with me when they deliver the 'Juan Manuel' to me."
And now he was on that journey, finally, but his mother had insisted on accompanying them, and nothing could be as he had imagined. She forced him to stay in his cabin for almost the entire day, because the sun would harm his delicate skin; he wasn't to have conversations with the sailors because they would mock him until he became complicit in their actions and foul language; he was forbidden from starting any work on deck, he was too weak for that; nor was he allowed to explore the interior of the ship or go near the steam engine since it was too dangerous. He had many books and plenty of paper to write on. So he spent hours reading, and only when they had to be stranded in Rosario for almost two weeks did he understand the benefits of that forced stop: with the engine stopped, there was no work to be done other than cleaning the different decks, and half the men were in the city. The sky was cloudy, but it wasn't raining. Then he went out on deck in broad daylight, with a folder of blank sheets of paper, climbed onto the railing, and sat on the figurehead, which was the bust of a woman with a face weathered by the waves, but whose slender breasts and two outstretched wings remained. Ariel remembered the figure of that woman in paintings from the French Revolution. He thought of the Winged *Victory of Samothrace* , without arms or head, but with wings. He began to write, glancing ahead from time to time. The river, still and murky at three in the afternoon. The Rosario dock, heavy with sorrow and weary men. He looked north, at the perspective of a river that was never the same: curves, branches, islands, a depth of variations more immense than the possibilities of infinity. And he saw, at the end of the horizon where the river narrowed and disappeared to the right and left, the two branches separated by a small island, its size hidden by mounds of vegetation, the darkening of the sky over the river. One or more clouds formed a curved line, perpendicular to the seabed. It looked like the letter "ñ".
It was the first thing he drew in his sketchbook, and from then on he filled page after page with drawings of everything he saw: nature, the port, people. For days he filled the sketchbook and added new pages, but all that stopped when he learned they had to set sail. The steam engine was already fixed. A few had seen him sitting on the figurehead, but no one told his mother, whose calls were low and infrequent. She didn't like to expose

her fears and her need to have her son by her side to the crew. She kept quiet and locked herself in her cabin, pressing her fists to her face to keep from crying.

He never showed his sketches to his father, much less to his mother, who, although she might approve of his artistic talent, would not approve of the subject matter or the way he had executed them. But the day he learned there were new passengers, Spaniards, and that one of them was ill, he was curious to meet them. He saw Altea leave the cabin several times during the first week. His mother also went in very often, and he noticed that their frequency reversed during the second week. The sick man's wife would leave in the morning and not return until late at night. His mother went in and out all day long, taking bandages and soiled clothes and returning with clean clothes, food, and water to drink or freshen the washcloth. One day he asked if he could visit the sick man; she smiled at him and stroked his cheek. He was so tall now that the caress seemed appropriate for a child, not for him. He pulled his head away, blushing; she understood and said nothing. She opened the door for him, and when he entered, she closed it again, leaving them alone.

It was mid-afternoon, and the sick man seemed to be dozing after lunch. He looked thin and gaunt, his beard half-grown, his torso bare and covered with brown hair, a sheet draped over him below the waist. Light streamed through the hatch along with the murmur of the river and the cries of some birds. He didn't know whether to say anything, so he simply sat up in bed, and Manuel opened his eyes.

"Ariel," he said.

- Do you know me?

-Your mother keeps talking about you…

Ariel blushed.

Manuel placed a hand on the back of Ariel's neck.

-You are as handsome as your mother says, don't be ashamed of her.

Manuel smiled, and Ariel felt at ease, perhaps for the first time in his life. In that place, with that man, there seemed to be no fear, not even the possibility of failing in any endeavor. What his mother expected of him was impossible to fulfill, and although his father demanded nothing of him, it was precisely that silence that spoke for him. The silence and the noise. But in that cabin, both that day and the days that followed, the silence felt

as natural as the sound, ethereal fragments that visited them, leaving scents and memories, without taking anything away. Manuel spoke to him of Spain, recalling family members he thought he had forgotten, uncles from Andalusia, cousins who had gone to live in Africa.
- Is it as dangerous as the books say?
"I've only been to Morocco, but my brother José has been all over the continent. He told me about the jungle and the rivers, and all this is somewhat similar."
-I read that a long time ago Africa was joined to South America, that's why.
"That's right, Ariel, that's what the experts say." And he formed a concave and a convex shape with his hands, joining them together. Ariel watched him, and suddenly all innocence vanished from his gaze.
Manuel gazed at him with fear, but the fear came from within himself, because he remembered José, and a very similar scene from when they were both teenagers in Cádiz. Manuel was scrawny and fair-skinned, José was already fully developed, and they were talking in his brother's room because Manuel went there almost every night before going to sleep to listen to his stories, the boasts, as he would later say, with which he bragged to his younger brother. And that's when it all began: José's suspicious, malicious stare, the hand games with which he tried to annoy him, the strength challenges he demanded he not refuse if he didn't want to be called a coward or a sissy. And Manuel, who always lost, would go back to his room and undress in front of the mirror to compare the sad muscles of his arms with his brother's, his still somewhat hunched body, even the timid size of his penis compared to José's. And he couldn't help but dream of his brother at night, because he knew José thought of him, because he recognized that his very apparent indifference and disdain for the frail brother was a clear expression of his need to protect him. When they were even younger, they used to sleep together in the same bed, but when José grew up, their father separated them. José's face that day, still the face of a boy, was one of utter desolation.
Ariel watched him silently as Manuel looked through the sketches in his drawing folder.
-They're expertly crafted, I can't believe they're the first ones...
-It's true...

"I believe you, Ariel, but you have a natural talent that you should develop. You should ask your parents to take you to study fine arts in Europe; I could give you some recommendations. Which painter do you like best?"
"I haven't seen much, only in books, but Goya amazes me. Sometimes he frightens me, but I can't stop looking at him."
José and his tastes again. Ariel was sometimes one, sometimes the other.
-Very good choice, but you should start with the classics.
-But I want to follow in my father's footsteps.
Manuel glanced at him sideways, and Ariel took a deep breath to puff out his chest.
- Is it what you like or what you think your father would like?
"I don't think my father minds much, but it's so I can spend more time with him..."
-I understand, your mother can be very possessive... I've noticed it.
At that moment Natacha came in. Ariel hid the folder, but not in time.
"What are you hiding, darling?" Her expression was affectionate, but when she saw that no one answered, she stiffened. She held out her arm, her hand open, saying nothing, waiting. And she would have remained like that for days if necessary. Ariel handed her the folder. She turned the pages one by one, without changing her expression.
The river from the bow, the deserted bank, the men carrying loads, the village women, the clouds, the dogs, even mangy Max. Oh, and there's more—these aren't landscapes, they're portraits. Where did you get the models? Or are they all in your head?
Natacha did not expect a response, and her tone became increasingly sarcastic and repressive.
Naked men bathing in the river, but there's hardly any water. And these women, obscenely scratching themselves, touching the men. And these innocent trees, with fruit hanging from their branches, drooping under their own weight; even the clouds form strange numbers, 666, perhaps?
And she threw the folder at Ariel's face, who fell backward onto the bed, more from the shock than from the blow. Never had his mother been so direct, nor had she ever used the slightest force against him.
Manuel, who was still lying down, did understand her. He got up and went to her. He touched her arm. It was barely noticeable, but she was trembling.

"You and your wife, and that mangy dog, are to blame. Ever since you arrived, one of you has been taking my husband away and the other my son."
"What are you saying, Natacha? Don't talk nonsense. You practically saved my life by placing the cross on my chest." Manuel didn't know the extent of the truth in his lie, but the beauty of the idea adorned his hypocrisy, which at least he found more tolerable than the absolute truth.
“Come with us, son,” he said to Ariel. And Ariel approached, trusting Manuel, and Manuel took Natacha in his arms. She allowed herself a few sobs, now Ariel. He smelled the scent of almonds on Natacha’s skin, and the acrid smell of the boy’s sweat. His beard was a refuge where both their faces seemed to find relief, like a warm, safe jungle. Suitable for hiding for a long time, and emerging stronger to bear the weight of the bitter scent of almonds. He made the sign of the cross with his left hand, because with his right he was holding Ariel against his chest.

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Ariel had gotten up from the table, head down, glancing at them sideways as he walked towards the hallway door. Tomasa passed him, making one of her usual brutally affectionate and exaggerated gestures, and asked:
Didn't you like your dinner, child? Are you going to bed now?
She hugged Ariel even though he resisted her affection because he knew his mother was watching. The maid did it deliberately in front of her; they both despised each other. When she let go, Ariel left, and Tomasa asked if she could clear the table. Natacha ignored her; she had already given up arguing with the Black woman, who, when angry, spoke in thick Portuguese. Tomasa's eyes reflected her hatred for Natacha, her arrogance, her rigidity; she even loathed the Polish accent Natacha couldn't suppress when irritated. Natacha felt that Tomasa knew her better than many others, and she had nothing to counterattack with, only the maid's ignorant and instinctive nature and her unwavering loyalty to Máximo Mendoza. She was still a slave, in a sense, but a freed one, and those were the most feared.

Manuel wasn't in the mood to endure the arguments he'd witnessed since his arrival either. He had a sullen look, avoiding Natacha's gaze, his fists clenched on the table, which he only released when the Black woman began clearing the table without a care for him. They barely spoke, but it was clear he distrusted this stranger. He put down the tablecloth and asked if they would like something to drink.
"The captain's cognac, old woman..." he said.
-The gentleman won't let me touch him…
"Tomasa, I'll take responsibility," Natacha said conciliatorily. The Black woman gave in because she saw that the argument was going to get worse. When they were alone, they looked into each other's eyes for the first time since they had sat down to dinner.
Do you think they'll come back tonight? Are you cynical enough to even say that?
Natacha took Manuel's hand, which was trembling.
-You know that I don't love my husband, only my son.
But I love my wife, and I won't tolerate…
"Think of Jesus Christ and all that he had to give up. He had the kingdom of heaven at his disposal to save himself, and he allowed himself to be crucified." She touched the cross on Manuel's chest, but didn't linger there. She caressed the skin with the soft down she had touched so many nights during his convalescence.
In a way she dared not yet put into words, she adored the body of that man, so fragile and wrathful at the same time, as if he were a resurrected Christ stubbornly refusing his destiny, again and again, and that was why he suffered so much. The way he looked at and treated Ariel was more than that of a father, and it was also what she could not relinquish. That man helped her son suffer less from his mother's looks, actions, and words. She could not and would not show weakness; Ariel was her torment and her heaven, the object of her unwavering love, brought to her by the hands of the past in Warsaw.
The only solace in the old, distant city had been the church two blocks from the Krakowsky house, its spacious and clean atmosphere, where wisps of air shimmered in the light from the stained-glass windows, and the saints extended their arms of faded plaster, and the dead flowers smelled of decay in the vases. And on the altar stood the Jesus Christ, so similar to

those made by the Indians in the Jesuit missions, mahogany Christs with large eyes painted with thick oil paint. The same was true of the blood spilled along the body, over the open wounds in the wood, with tendons and veins carved with the utmost perfection, as if they had followed the designs of Vesalius, of Gonçalves de Amusco, perhaps, or copied from the very corpses they must have had beside them while they carved. From the Mendoza family's ranch on the outskirts of Santa Fe, she would go to the city to see the crucifixes that abounded in the atrium and naves of the cathedral. She would sit on a pew, contemplating the air so similar to that of Warsaw, at least inside. The atmosphere of God was the same everywhere, and the carved crucifixes took the form of memories. Natacha in Santa Fe was the same young Natacha from Poland, who went to the church to take refuge and pray the rosary as many times as necessary to make time slip away. But time was always so slow that when she fell asleep and knew it was time to go home, the sun hadn't yet set, and her father was waiting for her at the door, not deigning to enter the church. He, so dignified, owner of mansions and lands, would not bow before the god of the poor, and when they returned home, hand in hand and in silence, she knew he would remind her of it once more. And she both hated and loved those hours after the clandestine escape to the church, because her father's punishments were transformed into the joys of crucifixion. Manuel's angry eyes drew her in, as did the underdeveloped muscles of his arms and chest, yet so firm they seemed sculpted. His anger attracted her; it was a remedy for the bitterness that threatened to depress her, a bitterness she needed to fight with the violence of words, gestures, or even just a look. Now he had taken her hands and was squeezing them tightly in his, and Natacha could smell the scent of Warsaw, of the narrow, cobbled streets, with small streams of stagnant water in the gutters after the winter rains. She closed her eyes and let herself be drawn in by the man's skin, by the hair on the back of his hands. They weren't blond like her father's, nor like Ariel's, but dark brown, but it didn't matter; it was even better because they resembled the hands of the true Christ, according to the story. His hands released her, and suddenly they were on her head, on either side, holding her tightly, pulling her toward him, crumpling the tablecloth, letting it fall to the floor, and making her rise from the chair and follow him where he wanted, kissing her and pressing her lips together painfully,

because he was biting her. She felt Manuel probing her body, under her dress, the black widow's dress she always wore.
When she opened her eyes, they were in Natacha's cabin, on the bed. She was lying on her back, the top of her dress torn to her shoulders, and her bodice ripped in two. Manuel was on top of her, not leaning on her, his hands on the mattress and his legs not touching her. He kissed her breasts, licked them. He knelt and watched her with anger and desire. No, she wouldn't escape or resist. He took off his shirt, and she saw the chest she had caressed so many times, feverish and sweaty, but this time it was the bloodied chest of Christ and the beautiful, blue eyes of old Krakowsky. For an instant she saw Ariel in those eyes, and she smiled. The father, the son, and Manuel, the Holy Spirit who came in their place.
And he removed her dress, slowly, but then he became more forceful, lifting her legs, spreading them, kissing her belly and licking her thighs and vagina, until her body was as wet as the river, and she felt him enter her as no one had for many years. Not asking permission, not reluctantly, not fearing what she might think or say. The man penetrated like a conqueror of the Americas, subjugating and destroying, and finally vanquished by nature, abundant in dangers and poisons. The man surrendered his essence, and his body lay exhausted, defeated by the Polish skeleton that had transported itself to the tropical jungles of South America. The Spanish conqueror annihilated by his own impetuosity, like a heart attack after the bite of one of the many snakes of the Paraná River.
The Polish skeleton was cold and dry, yet it breathed with a breath he had managed to steal to feed himself during the ecstasy of the crucifixion. Natacha was like a virgin, her body narrow and hard, rough, but yearning, and that sliver of moisture was enough to nourish his manly body. Natacha had carried Ariel in her womb, had nourished him for nine months, and now she nourished him, at least for that night.
Lying beside her, he caressed the belly from which Ariel, the blond Christ from whom he learned so much on this journey of discovery along the river, had been born. Ariel, the son. As if Manuel were destined to be the father of children who weren't his own. But what are blood and semen? he wondered, as he ran his fingertips over Natacha's body, her eyes open, staring into the void above her. Blood and semen, fragments of a dying body. Ariel and the other child, the one from Altea, were his responsibility.

And Ariel was already his par excellence.

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He fell asleep. When he woke up, he saw Natacha in the same position, her eyes open, staring at the ceiling, but her right hand was on Manuel's chest, clutching the cross in her fist.
-Natacha…- he said.
She didn't even seem to blink. He tried to open her fist, to loosen her fingers around the crucifix. It wasn't force she used to close her hand, just the interlacing of her fingers, clinging to each other as if each were a helpless limb trying to protect itself by reaching for the other, all acting toward the same goal: to hold the cross.
He gave in, slowly, without her even looking at him. Manuel got up, dressed only in his underwear, a pair of long breeches Mendoza had lent him. He went up on deck and looked over the side. The river was calm, the air heavy, the sky overcast. Soon it would rain heavily, the river would swell, and the journey upstream would be more arduous for the engines. He looked around at the men traveling from port to port, looking for work, lying on the deck, sprawled out like dogs, some naked, others covered with dirty blankets. He thought of the Greeks and their wise mythology. Would it be possible to make the River Styx flow upstream? To reverse the death to which all those human dogs were headed? Wasn't this journey to the source of the Paraná a subconscious attempt at that desperate need? Why were we looking for Christ at the end of the road, or the river in this case, when perhaps he was at the beginning, accompanying us in the fluid of the womb? Perhaps the child from Altea was speaking with God at that moment, perhaps Manuel had spoken with God, too, and the great misfortune of humankind was its fragile memory. But who had decided what should be forgotten? Memory is founded on contradiction; its essence is a pure dichotomy. He tried to read on the surface of the river the phrases of a Stoic thinker from before Christ, but the words drowned as they did in his memory, and when they resurfaced they were nothing more than meaningless corpses.

And then he felt someone grab him tightly by the neck and pull him back. The shock made him lose his balance, and they both fell onto the deck. The arm was weak and thin, but as insistent as a rope. He recognized Ariel; it was the color of his white skin, the scent of youthful sweat, the small whimpers of the boy he had heard so many times complaining about his mother's orders.

He turned to break free and they stood facing each other. Face to face, they questioned each other. Without speaking. The boy's arms tried to hit him, but he held them back. Ariel shook his legs to kick him, and Manuel braced his own against him.

- What's the matter?!

Ariel's face was contorted in an expression of terror and anger. There was no point in asking anything; she had either overheard or spied on her mother in her cabin.

-Son…

Ariel stopped and let him loosen his grip. Manuel's body was on top of his, blocking his view of the night sky, which he always feared. Several times during the first days of January they had spoken of their fear of the darkness of the sky, which seemed even deeper when there was a moon or stars, which only served to accentuate the imagined distances. Because they both knew that imagination was the culprit behind superstition, and art the only handrail to navigate those corridors between lateral abysses. Now Manuel's body protected him as if he were in a closed room, in a warm environment, sheltered from the elements, free from omens, relieved of the burden of time. And Manuel still saw that almost childlike face as one of those corpses that floated in the river: the faces of José and Manuel inverted. He: his brother. Ariel: him.

He heard the flapping of bats. They came from the east bank, flying over the river and settling on the ship's masts and decks. Most people ignored them, but the women covered themselves with tarpaulins or went into the engine room. The bats carried a smell of excrement that was sometimes more bothersome than their presence. Manuel got up and grabbed Ariel, but he resisted. He tried to lift him, but the boy tried to run away. He decided to grab his hands and began to drag him toward the cabin. Ariel screamed, but no one paid him any attention amidst the flapping of the bats and the shouts and laughter of the people. It was an ordered chaos,

because it was a habitual chaos. Many waited for these occasions to give in to the shouting and violence; the drunks screamed ecstatically, and the women wanted the men, thus aroused, to possess them. It was a witches' sabbath, perhaps, on St. John's Eve on an old ship in the middle of the Paraná River. The only way to survive, Manuel told himself, dragging Ariel along the floor to the cabin and throwing him onto the bed. The boy was hysterical, accusing him of raping his mother. Manuel couldn't help but laugh.

- Rape? You don't know what that is, son…

Ariel got up again and started hitting him. He was almost as tall as Manuel, but although Manuel managed to restrain him with some effort, he was already tired. He threw him back onto the bed, telling him not to act like an idiot. If he stayed still, he would explain. Then the boy hugged him and began to cry. Manuel hugged him back, and, patting his back, spoke to him in a soft, comforting tone, as if he were a five-year-old. But Ariel was fifteen, and he was almost a man. Yes, he was, Manuel told himself. And they hugged like two men who felt that their bodies were more than what they had been just a minute before: two separate bodies.

He felt Ariel's heartbeat against his chest, the thumping of his arms, the tears that dampened his skin. The boy's face was pressed against Manuel's chest, and he kissed the blond top of his head.

-Calm down, Ariel, calm down. I love you, my dear.

And Ariel stopped whining, and did a single thing she had thought about long before, perhaps. She gave Manuel a kiss on the cheek.

And Manuel, with that frail, delicate body in his arms, felt there was no longer any reason for coaxing or remorse; guilt no longer existed. Christ's body was like an angel in his arms, susceptible to destruction by his hands, fragile as an ear of corn, soft as a shrew's skin.

The bats continued to flap across the deck, crashing against the cabin walls. Manuel thought he had wings, but he was still. His arms were two long membranes encircling Ariel. He imagined the jungle on the banks of the Paraná River. The bats searching for food, and the shrews succumbing. And he pushed Ariel onto the bed and put his full weight on him. The boy tried to say something, but Manuel covered his mouth with one hand, while with the other he undressed him. Then he couldn't stop. He hit him in the face to make him stop crying, and Ariel stopped, ashamed. He turned him

over roughly. He ran his hands all over the boy's body, never taking his eyes off Ariel's terrified face, whose expression slowly changed, through all the possible contingencies of the flesh, while he placed his fingers inside Ariel, and then penetrated him as if he wanted to split him, like a divided statue, duplicated: two twin brothers, two twin corpses.
When it was all over, he lay on top of Ariel, who was breathing heavily, his face pressed against the mattress. They weren't two, they were still one. Manuel sat up a little, moving his chest away from Ariel's back. The crucifix hung from its chain, swaying and brushing against the boy's pale skin. The bats were gone; only the silence of the last hour before dawn remained. He fell asleep, still close to Ariel. The boy's body felt like an extension of his own.

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Ariel opened his eyes to the daylight, and what he saw was the pillow, wrinkled and damp, and next to his head, Manuel's head, asleep. He studied it closely, then his entire naked body. He placed a hand on Manuel's chest, brushed against the curly, brown hair, gently touched his face and beard, the closed eyelids beneath which lay the light eyes that resembled his own. The Krakowsky eyes, his mother had told him. He would have loved to have Captain Mendoza's eyes, he told himself many times, and then so many times that it was no longer necessary to tell himself that he could never have them. Somehow, his mother told him the truth with her silence, and with her shouts and her steely gaze. That was why they both adored Manuel; for her, perhaps, he was the father, the husband, the son, all at once. For Ariel, what was he?
Without waking him, he touched his chest and abdomen, then his pubic hair. Now without fear, he touched Manuel's genitals and felt the man shudder, but he didn't open his eyes. He would have liked to see them while his hands caressed his body, and then his gaze fell on the cross, which was leaning to one side. He felt remorse and guilt, he felt the shame that had always overwhelmed him since he had heard his mother's voice.

She got out of bed, her body aching. She remembered the night, and couldn't quite put her finger on what had happened. Yes, she knew, but she wouldn't accept it, and that was okay. The pain, however, grew as the scar grew in her memory: it was like a dark fragment in the vision of one of her eyes, a cloudy area from which watery fluid oozed. She dried her eyes, tried to look at the cabin. Daylight was already full, but very early. She only heard the usual movements of the sailors. Her mother probably hadn't gotten up yet. Still not seeing clearly, she felt her way toward the bed. Manuel was still asleep, with a soft sound in his throat that wasn't quite a snore. She wanted to touch him again, and that hurt. She shouldn't, even if just a kiss would be enough. She wanted to do much more than touch him, she wanted to hold him in her hands. But she didn't know why: perhaps to kill him, maybe. Her hands. He looked at them carefully, the hands of a boy who was becoming a man, the back hairy, the palm rough.

With one hand she touched the cross. She moved closer to Manuel's body, so that the cross brushed against her own chest. She felt the man's breath, the warmth of the night on his skin. The cross protected them, but suddenly she heard her mother's voice. She turned her head toward the door. No movement, no sound. She looked at the clock on the table. Four-thirty in the morning. She wouldn't get up until seven.

He sat on the bed and placed a hand on Manuel's shoulder. He looked at the body again and compared it to his own. He wasn't a man yet, and that's how it had been that night. A boy resembling a weak woman. He began to touch his body; he knew how to stimulate himself. He had learned it on his own, listening to the sailors' conversations, sometimes with suggestive questions that ended with the laughter of strangers. He used to do it in his cabin, attentive to his mother's footsteps, to the voice that urged him on. But now he was with Manuel; they were two men, and he shouldn't feel ashamed. He rubbed his penis, looking around at the walls, the hatch, the slight movements of Manuel's body. Attentive to the sounds: the footsteps in the passageway, the river's waves. And when he finished, urged on and afraid of everything, he held in his hand the proof of his guilt: the fluid he had felt in his body just last night, and he saw the blood on his hand. He tried to wipe himself with the sheet, but it wouldn't come off. He rubbed his hands together, beginning to despair; they felt dry, but the stains remained. Then he saw the crucifix above the bed: his mother's gift. A

Warsaw crucifix, from his grandfather's old house, one of the relics saved in exile. Christ was looking at him, and he went to the wall and wiped the red semen on the wood. Without realizing it, he was crying, and his despair was so profound that he knew, irrevocably, that he was now a man. And being a man, he could make any decision he wanted. Guilt was his pride; his mother's gaze was etched with that word. Every crease of his face was a precise carving by the chisel of guilt. Guilt as a consequence of pleasure, pleasure as a product of guilt. The pain, so penetrating, intense, and continuous, had become a necessity.

The decision was his. So he searched through the library books. He pushed aside the ones he would never need again, even the sketchbooks, which ended up on the floor. He found the Bible and went to the book of Matthew, chapter 19, verse 8. “If something harms you, cut it off.” Those were, more or less, the words. He searched page by page, without finding it. He was afraid of tearing the pages, but soon he didn't care anymore. It existed, he was sure of it; he had heard it so many times, and even read it.

But he was determined. That last-minute doubt, that absurd notion that what he remembered didn't exist, that the whole world was a farce, had to be ignored. His hands were the embodiment of guilt. He thought of the lives of the saints his mother used to read to him as a child, during the hot summer afternoons in Santa Fe, by the river, under the weeping willows. He imagined then the old funeral boats that carried the bodies of the martyred saints, while the willow branches were like red tears floating by, trying to keep up with the processions.

Ariel was on a large ship, and he imagined the powerful impression he would make as his body was carried by the water. People watching from the shores, making the sign of the cross, and his own mother, in mourning and wailing, like a heartbroken widow. Why a widow? He wasn't her husband, but her son. He loved her, but he also loathed her. He hated her dry, obsessive caresses, he detested the kisses she gave him on the lips, he was tormented by the way she touched him and looked at him and spoke to him, loving him and missing him and dominating him.

Natacha was a whirlwind swirling around him, a wall threatening to collapse on him, and also a roof protecting him from the heat, but not from the rain. She was Christ, but not God. She was the crucifix above the bed, hanging over him, watching everything, listening to everything, even his

thoughts. She had told him that the dead surrounded the living, observing their every action, counting them. And guilt, then, was a single, immense, invisible thing. Impalpable, and therefore invincible.

He walked toward the coat of arms, as ancient as the ship, which represented one of the many branches of the Bourbon dynasty. The image was rusted, but it depicted two crossed weapons: a sword and an axe, with a carved torch in the center. He climbed onto a chair and tried to pry one of them off. The sword was impossible to remove, but the axe came off with relative ease. He weighed it in his hands, felt the edge. It was useless now. He thought of the knife Manuel had given him. He began to sharpen the axe, naively, with the knife's edge. Little by little, and almost half an hour later, the axe was cutting, even if only a little. He glanced at Manuel as he worked, watching to see if he would wake up. But the man was exhausted; he must have spent the whole day accumulating resentment toward Altea, then the hours with his mother, and then him. He certainly wouldn't wake up until late, and Ariel would have time to do what he wanted.

He looked at himself in the mirror on the wardrobe. Naked, holding the axe in one hand. Slender and almost hairless, were it not for the sparse pubic hair. His hair so light it was nearly white in the bright light. He sat down in the French-style desk chair, resting his left arm on it, palm up. He watched the final movements of his hand, as if observing those of a rabid dog. It was twitching, trying to break free from the invisible strings of silence. His fingers moved, the artery in his wrist throbbed rapidly, the tendons tensed until they ached.

And then he raised the axe in his right hand, the hand that had always been the executioner of the right-thinking, of the reasoning of the Enlightenment, of the haughty justice of science, to the side of the good thief who died with Christ. And he observed the cross on Manuel's chest, then the crucifix on the wall. Christ's head was inclined to the right, then he looked again at the bed; Manuel, too, was looking to the right, toward him. And he would bring down his left hand, the hand of red semen, the hand of pleasure and pain, the incredulous and hesitant hand, the saboteur's hand, without remorse, the free hand. It would be brought down by the obscene side of guilt, by the gaze that radiated cynicism like a prayer, the caresses of an eagle and the kisses of a raven.

He gazed into the eyes that stared at him, just before the axe fell. The clear eyes of Christ from the bed. But it was too late for everything, except for the cry of a man who tried to stifle the sobs of a boy, who nevertheless refused to be silenced.
The hand lay like a dead bird on the table, while blood oozed from the left stump, the headless arm.
Manuel grabbed the sheet and wrapped it around the wound, nervous and frightened. More than anguish, it was still astonishment that gripped him. But he could already feel the bitter wellspring of despair rising. He tried to think of what to do. First, he needed to stop the bleeding, then call out to someone, because he couldn't leave Ariel alone, who was trying to free himself from the cloth. He had to get Julio to come and stitch the wound before he bled out completely. He saw that Ariel was turning pale, but it must be more from the fright than from the blood loss. The sheet was already soaked, and the boy managed to throw it off and escape from Manuel's grasp. He opened the door with his right hand, the hand that always finds a way, that always makes the right decisions, takes the shortcuts, that lessens the pain by cutting it off at the root. The one who guided Ariel's steps through the corridor and up the stairs to the deck, while Manuel followed behind, unable to reach him, as if Ariel had the wings of an angel, as if he were already ethereal like his soul.
Ariel reached the deck and ran naked toward the leeward side. His skin dripped with sweat; his left forearm was a mass of flesh and clotted blood, swarming with flies. No one tried to stop him. The few sailors present didn't act in time; they probably didn't recognize him, since Ariel looked so different this time from the neat, tidy, and serene young man he always was. They saw him jump over the side, weeping and groaning, because everything hurt—his hand was gone, and undoubtedly his soul as well, because things weren't going as the verse from Matthew said.
They saw the body fall into the waters of the Paraná, sinking and staining the current with blood.
"Man overboard!" was the usual cry someone gave. Some ran to the gunwale and two climbed aboard to jump, but old Julio appeared and stopped them, grabbing their clothes. He pointed to the caimans on the shore, which were already sinking into the water at the call of blood.

Manuel appeared suddenly and, ignoring everyone, climbed onto the railing. Julio and the others did nothing to stop him. Manuel was naked, like the boy, and the mark of guilt was etched on the man's face. It was so clear that they didn't make the slightest gesture of pity or hatred; it was an expression any man could have had, and they weren't the ones to take away the pleasure of pain from a man's face. They knew that he who suffers feels compassion for himself, with his own despair, and the only useful pity is that which allows the inevitable.

But another hand stopped Manuel, who was screaming and struggling with the urge to throw himself into the river to save Ariel. He didn't see the caimans, and if he did, he didn't pay them any mind. He was thinking about the dead hand on the desk in the cabin, the boy's body, the sobs that had fallen on his own chest, Ariel's stifled cry, as faint and sorrowful as the clouds that were now covering the sky above the river. Natacha's hands held him tightly, but they would have been useless if he hadn't suddenly awakened at their touch, just as he had the first time he'd touched them when he boarded. The hands that had caused such an intense shock inside him that they had left him convalescing for weeks. The hands that had felt the bats in his soul and scared them away, only to make them flutter around him. Only Ariel had calmed them. But there they were, the boy and his hand, like the only dead bat.

Natacha's hands held him, and Manuel's body yielded to reason and resignation. Natacha hugged him tightly as he screamed and trembled. Between them stood the cross, their bodies forming a kind of protective wall around it. Christ was so weak that he often killed himself. His deaths were many, and without looking toward the river, they both saw what the eyes of others witnessed: the caimans feeding, and the skeleton of death submerging into the river.

4

"Why did you name the dog after me?" Mendoza asked.
They walked arm in arm. Like husband and wife. He was in his everyday uniform, but with the collar unbuttoned, his cap tucked under his left arm, his trousers rolled up to the cuffs, dirty with the dust and mud of Lavalle port, and his ever-present saber, which, although it got in the way when getting in and out of the boat that had taken them from the ship to the dock, he would never leave behind, except in bed and on his deathbed. He even bathed with his saber close by, always within reach, just in case. He knew that irritated Natacha, but Altea didn't even seem to notice, and he liked that about her, that composure, which, even if it was nothing more than a facade to hide a great deal of anger, was gradually subsiding, powerless under its own weight.
She walked beside him, arm in arm with the captain, her pale, icy figure slender, wearing the dress she'd taken out of the trunk for the first time since leaving the village of Toba, a dress she only wore on excursions. Because that's what this departure from the ship had been for her, after just a few weeks, but such intense weeks that they felt like months. Almost everything had changed, and Natacha's words as she watched them leave arm in arm were the culmination of all that time. A kind of triumph, or perhaps revenge. But everything was just beginning, she told herself. Lavalle was only the first small town on her path to a different life. "Like husband and wife," Natacha had said, almost in a whisper, as she descended the ladder to the boat, leaning against Mendoza, who had taken her by the waist and gently placed her, like a slender, white bird, in the seat. She had heard her clearly, but did not deign to raise her eyes to the deck; she already knew the rhetorical figure of that sour woman.
"I named him before I knew your name, not after Máximo, but after Maximilian, an old Scandinavian king. He has the look of the greyhounds that were used in hunts, and you told me he's a descendant of the ones your family breeds."
Altea gazed at him tenderly, but her eyes weren't tinged with apathy or foolishness. Even though she was beginning to fall in love, that didn't mean she'd abandon her sarcasm. Hers was clean and well-intentioned, Natacha's dark and malicious.

Once ashore, Max followed a few steps behind, sometimes running ahead, other times lagging a few steps back to sniff at something that caught his eye. Then he'd catch up, circling them, or lowering his head in embarrassment when they scolded him for being too excited. Finally, he stood beside Altea's dress, which seemed to appeal to him because of its soft yet sturdy texture. Perhaps it was finely worked and polished leather from the workshops of Cádiz; he no longer remembered where or when he had bought it. He touched his chest to undo two buttons of the high collar and noticed the absence of the cross. It was strange that he missed it today of all days; perhaps it was the atmosphere of the port, with the rural school where Indian children graduated. He thought, and wondered, what had become of Cahrué. But that was all in the past. Máximo Mendoza's body dominated her: his incorruptible arm, his erect torso, his firm stride, his dark face framed by a thick, black beard. She began to think of the body she had first seen one night on the ship, naked to the waist, washing away the night's sweat with water from a basin. The hair on his chest was like an inverted triangle, so different from Manuel's body, slender and sparsely haired, that it no longer seemed strange. They had kissed for the first time that very night, hidden behind the door that separated them from the cabin where Natacha slept, from the bed where he would soon lie next to his wife, beneath the crucifix on the wall. A kiss clouded by the dense thoughts that crossed their minds while it lasted. However, there was no turning back now. Soon they would reach a place where Natacha's gaze was far away, and not even her God could watch over them.

They traveled slowly through the town, taking almost two hours to reach Valente's hardware store. People waved to the captain from their windows or leaned forward from the rickety chairs they sat in by their front doors. They greeted him cheerfully, but also with utmost respect. He shook everyone's hand and treated them with great familiarity, asking about a family member he hadn't seen in a long time or about some unfinished work in town. A cart passed by with an elderly couple, a kind of dilapidated old sulky.

"Maximo," said the old man, with a white, curly beard, blue eyes, and skin weathered by the elements. The woman leaned forward, squinting and narrowing her eyes, and suddenly let out a cry of joy.

- But he's my dear godson!

"Captain Mendoza, my dear," the man corrected her. "More respect for rank."
-To his old aunt he will always be the boy Máximo.
Mendoza climbed onto the cart and hugged them both. He saw that they were looking at Altea with curiosity.
-Guys, this lady is accompanying me to see a doctor in Santa Lucía, she is a passenger.
Altea nodded to them, but they merely shook their heads. They were already familiar with their nephew and godson's habits, but knowing Natacha, they couldn't completely disapprove.
- And how is the child Ariel?
-Okay, Auntie, he's trying to grow up, but Natacha won't let him.
They remained silent for a while.
- And how are you all doing, and how's the stay going?
"More or less, we had to sell several animals. The politicians in Buenos Aires do whatever they want over there, from what we hear, but here the thieves are in the governor's office. They're worse than the Indians when it comes to stealing; at least the Indians steal out of hunger. Corruption and famine—that's the perfect recipe for bringing out the crooks."
The old man remained silent, and his eyes shone.
-He had to sacrifice Anastasio last week; his stomach was full of bugs.
- And the vet didn't see it?
She was about to answer, but the old man spoke first, furious.
- With what money, you mean?
-But they didn't sell...
"The tax payments took it all. Our family has been in this province for 150 years, we founded towns, we created jobs, and those sons of bitches charge us like we're one of those young gringos settling around here. No respect, son, no respect at all, damn it!"
The old man lamented, without letting go of the reins.
-Before returning to the ship, I'll stop by and visit them...
-Don't worry if you can't, you're young and nobody has fun with a couple of old guys like us.
She tried to calm him down.
"You're talking about yourself, you old, boorish, bitter man. I can't see a thing anymore, but I'm not giving up yet."

They said their goodbyes. The cart wobbled because one wheel was several centimeters longer than the other. The horse had grown tired of pushing to one side, and every now and then it moved at a walking pace.
"Who was Anastasio?" Altea asked.
-My godfather's horse. He would have turned forty this year; he was as strong as an oak until recently. He accompanied him in the Battle of Caseros when he was still a colt. He kept him in his shed like a king, and every morning he took him for a walk, although he didn't ride him because his knees were bad.
Mendoza remained silent as they continued walking, perhaps thinking of other times. From the town's main store approached a very elegant woman, wearing a fine dress covered by an apron, silver earrings, and her hair neatly gathered in a bun. In one arm she carried a small wicker basket, and in the other a cloth purse.
- Is old General Las Heras complaining again?
-Good morning, Lucrecia. I'd like to introduce you to Mrs. Menéndez Iribarne. This is my dear cousin, Mrs. Aráoz Urquiza.
The women shook hands meekly. Mendoza knew that no one in his family liked seeing him with a woman who wasn't his wife, even though none of them could stand Natacha.
"How can you say that about the old man? You should help him more; you're in a better position than he is," the cousin told him.
"I already offered it to him, but he doesn't want any help from the Urquizas. He's a grumpy old Unitarian, and he'll die buried with his principles. Let's not start arguing about the same thing. If you want to come to our house, we'll be waiting for you anytime." She said goodbye to Altea with a haughty gesture and walked off towards where two Black men were waiting with shopping bags and boxes.
-You already know some of my family…
-It seems to me that the whole town is your family…
-It's almost true, Lucrecia is related to Don Justo through her marriage to a nephew, or second cousin since he is the son of a cousin of the general.
-But what does General Las Heras have to do with you?
"It's just another one of my cousin's sarcastic remarks. Actually, he's one of the sons of old General Las Heras, and since he never rose above the rank of colonel, the resentment over that turned into a cruel joke within our

family. He's not my biological uncle, of course, but they were both my godparents."

It was already midday, and they walked through the sunny, almost deserted streets of the town of Lavalle. Some of the houses on the outskirts were made of adobe, but as they approached the center, brick houses and buildings became more common. A chapel stood facing the neglected plaza, its wooden benches overgrown with tall grass, and in the center a bust of General Lavalle, covered in moss and with a broken nose. Someone had also destroyed the right shoulder, where his rank insignia had been.

They arrived in front of the wrought-iron gate of a large shop on the corner. The facade was more well-maintained than the other buildings, even the church. It had a pointed arch and two columns on either side. The iron gate reminded Altea of the classic gates of the old courtyards of Cádiz. She stopped to look closely and read the inscription above the gate: “Hardware and General Store, of Don Fermín Valente.”

Upon entering, the cool shade offered her relief, but the contrast with the darkness also caused her to lose her balance for a moment. She grabbed Mendoza's arm.

- Are you OK?

Altea nodded, another fainting spell from the pregnancy, but it would soon pass. She jumped at the sound of a deep bass voice, and a squat figure approaching with heavy footsteps on the packed earth floor.

- My dear Captain Mendoza! What an honor to have you back in these parts!

The accent was unmistakably Catalan. Altea's eyes adjusted, and he could see the enormous interior of the place, crammed with shelves and counters, with tools of all kinds on the floor or hanging from the ceiling. Burlap sacks, dozens of shovels and spades, plows leaning against the walls —and that was just what was visible at first glance. Behind the counters were cabinets with hundreds of shelves and drawers.

The men hugged.

-Don Fermín, I brought a fellow countrywoman so you can share memories.

The man must have been just over fifty years old, obese, dressed in a suit that clashed with the work environment, but Altea told herself that he must have many subordinates, being perhaps the richest man in the town.

He approached her and hugged her tightly.

"I'm so happy to meet you, dear lady. I can smell the scent of my Spain; I feel it in your hair. It's the scent of the land."
Altea smelled the acrid breath of the cigar Don Fermín had been smoking a little while before. But above all, she felt the old man's tears beginning to wet her cheek. She tried to gently pull away from his arms, and Mendoza began to help her.
-Come on, come on, Don Fermín, don't get carried away or you'll hurt the lady.
Altea felt she was portraying a misleading situation. Despite her birth, she had only ever been a guest in Spain, a Dane who had been born there by chance. Her marriage to a Menéndez Iribarne had been an attempt, she only now realized, to feel less like an outsider in that country.
-You can't imagine how happy it makes me to meet someone who comes from Spain…
"But I've been in these lands for more than five years now, sir..."
"Please, call me Don Fermín. But I left Catalonia thirty years ago, and I've never returned. That's left me *a bit crazy* , like now, when I'm behaving inconsiderately towards a lady."
She looked at him curiously, but understandingly.
- *Come home.*
They followed him down a long corridor lined with tools and bags. Every now and then the man coughed, and his cough echoed down the corridor like that of an asthmatic. They reached a door that led to the area where he lived with his children.
Antonio is going around the rooms collecting orders. Lorenzo *is a mess.* He takes care of the accounts, but he leaves all the papers lying around.
He started gathering the folders with the orders, invoices, promissory notes, and letters that were on the kitchen table. Lorenzo appeared, buttoning his trousers, and when he saw Altea, he was speechless. His father slapped him on the head and made him flee the kitchen.
" *Ill-mannered* !" he shouted at her. "Excuse me, ma'am, this is a house of men with the customs of men alone. *Since my wife died."*
-Don't worry, Don Fermín, I've spent five years in a Toba village, trying to teach indigenous children.
-I bet he seduced them…
Altea and the captain laughed.

-None of that, I gave up.
"I can't offer you anything for lunch, but my maid, old Dorotea, is going to prepare a grand dinner for us tonight. *Are you sure?*"

Altea doubted that the Catalan phrases that slipped out were correct. Thirty years made you forget many things.
"Only tonight, Don Fermín, to talk business," Mendoza replied.
"Dorothea!" the man shouted. After a while, a very short woman arrived, with gray hair tied up on top of her head as if she wanted to be taller that way, but the curve of her back didn't help. She greeted him politely, without speaking.
-Prepare something tasty for the five of us tonight. The big fish Lorenzo brought yesterday.
Lorenzo suddenly appeared; perhaps he had been listening, hidden behind the door frame. He was still a teenager, and he stared, fascinated, at the captain and Altea.
-Yes, *son* , we'll eat from your food. You're a better fisherman than an office worker. For your own good, I hope you change.
They spent the entire afternoon in the backyard. A high wall covered in vines and thorny trees separated them from the street. Don Fermín was a distrustful man, protective of what he had achieved through his own efforts. The garden was meticulously maintained, and he admitted that cultivating and improving it whenever possible was his passion.
“My wife died right here, planting cockscomb.” He rose laboriously from the wide, low armchair where he had sat almost all afternoon, until the sun began to set. He took Altea’s hand, not as a daughter, but as a lover being led to show her something very dear. He led her to a corner of the garden where there was a large bush with big, red flowers.
"These are rooster combs." He bent down to cut one and give it to her, but Altea noticed he tried to stop him.
"No, please, don't commit such a sacrilege, Don Fermín." But the man continued his task, and cut the flower, and handed it to him.
- *Només ho faig amb les dones triades* .
Altea was embarrassed because she didn't understand. Mendoza leaned close to her ear and translated the sentence for her.
It was the first time in many years that she felt completely at peace with the small world around her.

*

Lorenzo Valente had a dog. He called him Duke. During the afternoon, the boy didn't appear in the garden, while the adults chatted, seated in the wrought-iron chairs that Don Fermín had commissioned from a blacksmith in Goya when he married his wife. She herself had woven the fabric that covered the feather cushions. Old Dorotea had brought them a tray with the kettle and the mate gourd, and a platter of freshly baked biscuits. Fermín left the task of preparing the mate to Mendoza. Altea drank mate out of social obligation, but she didn't particularly enjoy it.

-You are of Spanish blood, like me. We haven't quite gotten used to these Creole ways.

Altea smiled, without contradicting him. Why dispel the image he had formed of her, if it offered him some solace from the terrible longing he felt for his homeland? However, something was bothering her: something strange, as if she were on a stage and didn't realize it. So she said:

"Don Fermín, my mother was Spanish, but my father was Danish. He was an agronomist, and he met my mother while traveling in Spain. They moved to Copenhagen. When she was pregnant, my father died at sea. She was devastated, so she returned to her family in Cádiz, and that's where I was born. But everything in my house revolved around my father's memory; he was an exceptional scientist and an adventurer, of course, which is why I lost him so soon..."

Mendoza placed a hand on Altea's back. Don Fermín, disillusioned, no longer asked for souvenirs from Spain, and looked at her now as if she were not a woman, because his mind seemed to be working in reverse, his defensiveness now contradictory.

Then they heard the back garden gate open, the one that led directly to the sidewalk and the street, hidden among the bushes. Lorenzo came in with the dog, who came running and lunged at Max, who was sitting on his hind legs next to Altea's chair, waiting for a treat. Max had been taken by surprise, but he reacted in time, and as soon as he found himself on his back on the ground, he jumped up and backed away from the other dog,

growling menacingly. The fur on both their backs was bristling, their tails stiff, their teeth bared, their faces twisted. Growls and barks followed one another, but they didn't attack each other. Lorenzo didn't move; he simply watched. Mendoza went behind Max to grab his leash and separate them.
"Lorenzo, grab Duque!" he shouted, because he feared the dog would attack them both. He had his saber resting beside his chair, and if necessary, he would use it.
The boy didn't react. Altea couldn't understand what was wrong with him; he seemed stupid, or perhaps mentally retarded. Something about his eyes, sometimes stony, sometimes bright as water, suggested as much. But his features were normal, even intelligent. Light brown, curly hair, a broad forehead, fair skin, a tall, well-proportioned body. His hands were in the pockets of his riding breeches. He must have been riding a little while before, his dog trotting alongside the horse.
"Didn't you hear Don Máximo?" the priest said, pushing him, and then Duque turned around and faced Don Fermín. Only then did Lorenzo speak:
- Stay still, Duke!
The dog calmed down and sat at Lorenzo's feet.
" *Damn this dog,"* muttered Don Fermín. "Go inside and stay in your room until dinner. You have work to finish." Lorenzo looked at him without answering, but the contempt he felt for his father was painfully clear in his eyes. Altea didn't dare use the word "hate," but the contempt she had read in those eyes was perhaps worse. She left with the dog, who didn't look at or threaten anyone else once he was at his owner's side.
They sat down again, but it was already dark, the mate was cold, and the old woman didn't come back to change the water.
"We'll have dinner at ten. If you'll excuse me, I have some errands to finish at the business." He got up with effort and went into the house.
Altea and Mendoza stayed in the garden. Max licked the wounds he had sustained from the brief encounter. Mendoza stroked him, but accustomed to the routine of that house, he had put his legs up on the empty chair, closed his eyes, and turned his face to the violet sky that was slowly darkening behind the trees that separated the house from the street.
Altea didn't know what to do. She thought about going to the kitchen and helping the old woman, even if it was just to have someone to talk to. But she had no desire to do what she thought was expected of her, even though

there was no one there to demand it of her. She wouldn't go to the kitchen, where women who didn't know what else to do went, staring at half-cooked food or the remains of dirty dishes, and where every object emanated a smell of filth and imminent decay. The objects in a kitchen suddenly seemed like a cemetery to her. And then she got up from her chair and called Max. The dog looked at her for a moment and tried to get up, but one of his hind legs gave way, and Mendoza's hand, on his back, held him down. The captain was asleep; Max would stay with him.

She then walked toward the back door, making her way through the branches of the bushes. Vines covered almost the entire door, and it opened like a leafy door, but heavy. The street was busy. Women passed by with children in tow, carrying shopping bags. Some looked at her suspiciously, others smiled and waved. Several carts passed in the opposite direction from the town, with men and boys who were surely going fishing at the pier. Dogs came and went, alone or accompanying people. The sun had already set, and the town lights were like fireflies, flickering and weak. She leaned against the wall, watching the darkness settle over the streets. The people slowly dwindled, and only the lights on the hardware store's facade remained, clear and bright. A scent of damp grass and fresh air filled the sidewalk next to the garden. Ready to go inside and wash up before dinner, she turned around and found herself facing Lorenzo. He was dressed in a suit that must have belonged to his father when he was young and thin, and then to his older brother, because it was faded and had an old-fashioned cut. It was a gray frock coat, with matching trousers, a white shirt, and a bow tie of indeterminate color. His hair was flattened, and his face was clean-shaven. He smelled of stale cologne. My God, Altea thought, this boy undoubtedly has some mental problem that makes him unsociable and out of place; but she quickly corrected herself, people like herself were different from the rest, and that didn't make them crazy.

"You look very handsome..." she said, trying to make amends for what had happened a little while before.

The boy couldn't have been more than twenty years old yet; he coughed to clear his throat.

"My dad asks me to apologize to him for what this guy did..."—and he pointed to the dog, who was sitting next to his right leg, looking at them alternately.

-So you're doing it because your father told you to, not because of anything you did yourself...
The other one frowned.
-You didn't stop the dog, letting it almost kill mine...
-Everyone defends themselves as best they can...
"I've seen that before, dear... you're still too young to have such cold ideas about life. But let's leave that aside..." She took his left hand and heard Duke growl. Lorenzo hissed, and the dog fell silent.
-Let's go inside, Lorenzo. I need to wash up before going to the dining room.
They crossed the garden, and Mendoza was gone. Voices could be heard from the room where they were going to have dinner. Lorenzo entered the room, filled with lights and voices, but she went to the kitchen and saw Dorotea at her leisurely work.
-Excuse me for bothering you, but I'd like to wash up a bit...
The old woman pointed down a hallway, offering no further directions. Altea entered the dim light. It was the same hallway that led to the shop, but she managed to find a door from which the smell of ammonia wafted. The bathroom was large, with an enormous wall mirror, porcelain fixtures that looked imported from Europe—blue and hand-painted—and embroidered curtains over the bathtub, but there were urine stains on the floor and everything was dirty and neglected. The water refreshed her, and when she lifted her head, she had to hold onto the sink. Another wave of dizziness.
She returned down the corridor and entered the brightly lit room. As she entered, everyone fell silent, and Don Fermín approached, taking her hand and leading her to the chair he had assigned her. Mendoza sat beside her, with Max lying under the chair, facing the older brother, Antonio, with his girlfriend, and Lorenzo. She didn't see Duque, but guessed he was under the chair because she heard the sporadic growls of the two dogs as they spoke from beneath the table.
Don Fermín laughed at the situation.
-Here we only need horses and cows to sit them down to dinner.
Everyone celebrated the idea, and Antonio introduced his girlfriend to Altea. She was a shy twenty-year-old girl dressed in white, with hair as light as Altea's, but pulled back tightly on her head. The dress had a high

neckline and was made of very thick fabric. Altea wondered if she wasn't hot, because she saw her sweating, but she dabbed at her forehead quite openly, or sometimes her boyfriend did, and he joked about it. The girl was undoubtedly suffering, but she didn't dare tell Antonio. Then he said:
-Captain, where did you find this Scandinavian beauty?
Mendoza was used to that family's temperament; he adapted to them when they were alone, but he knew Altea's mind worked differently. Don Fermín grumbled; his children gave him a hard time, but Antonio was already grown and the heir to the business. Altea realized that they both controlled her father. Because of the old man's outgoing and good-natured character, she had learned to give in, even though she tried to pretend otherwise. Because losing his children to the business meant losing his secure future in old age.
She noticed Lorenzo's hidden smile when his brother asked that question. Mendoza ignored it, and yet asked in turn:
- How was work today?
"That's normal, Captain. But your godfather, Las Heras, is causing me a lot of trouble. He owes me six months' worth of the things he used for the ranch repairs. We've only been lenient with him because of you, of course..."
Mendoza became serious.
-He hadn't told me anything...
-Of course not, she's embarrassed...
- And why, Don Fermín, didn't you warn me about that? You know I could cancel that debt.
The old man looked doubtful. He glanced at Lorenzo, who was keeping the accounts, and then at Antonio, who was the collector.
"We didn't tell my father so as not to upset him; I know how much he appreciates his whole family," Antonio replied in his place.
"And why are you telling me this now, in front of him?" Mendoza asked.
Antonio's mustache and beard grew damp. He ran his hand through his hair and used the same handkerchief he had used to wipe his girlfriend's sweat, drying his own forehead.
-Because it has already become a very considerable debt...
“And because they could collect while I was there, couldn’t they?” the captain interrupted. Ignoring the boy, he addressed the old man. “I’d like

to see the invoices tonight, if possible, Don Fermín.” He knew the old man was suffering, and he hoped his sons wouldn’t be there that night while they reviewed the papers. The old man no longer had the heart to deny them anything. However, Mendoza knew them well enough not to trust them.

- *Per descomptat, per descomptat* ...- said Don Fermín.

Dorotea came in with the fish. Everyone applauded and congratulated her. The dogs seemed to forget their fight and raised their snouts. The men also abandoned their quarrel for the entire duration of the dinner. They drank the Catalan wine that Fermín kept in his cellar for special occasions, and everyone praised the flavor of that 1877 vintage. The captain had contributed a bottle, brought from the ship's hold, of a Cabernet from Bordeaux.

"And when will you recoup your investment in that old clunker, Captain?" Antonio asked. Back in the fray, the men laughed this time, because the wine had already been passed around to ease the tension.

Whenever it is, I don't care, don't worry…

“If I’m not worried, Captain, that’s the least of my concerns…” and he proposed a toast to the success of the “Juan Manuel’s” voyages. “If the real Juan Manuel were to return from wherever they have him locked up, this country would be a different place…” Antonio’s girlfriend dropped a fork on her plate and looked at everyone, apologizing. He looked at her disapprovingly.

"It's because María Elena's grandfather was a Unitarian, she's a Varela. I don't know which of her many siblings was denounced to the legislator..."

"They killed him," she said. Her voice was clear for the first time all night. The boyfriend ignored her from that moment on.

Don Fermín never meddled in politics; that had been one of the reasons for his prosperity. He never said no to anyone, and then he did what suited him. But his children were prone to speaking their minds, and he feared this greatly.

-No politics at this table, you know I'm forbidden from it.

"Let's not end the night badly, boys," said Mendoza, and made another toast to the government of Dr. Pellegrini.

Seeing himself alone raising his glass, he burst out laughing. Altea wanted to help him and joined in the toast, then the others began to laugh too, but

without toasting, and the dogs started circling the table, excited by their owners' commotion, licking each of their hands from time to time, hoping for food.

It was past midnight when they finished the coffee Dorotea had been pouring from the large coffeepot she held with a dish towel. She had served more than three cups to each of them, using the china that Fermín and his wife had received as a wedding gift. The old man stared for a long time at the small Austrian porcelain cup, holding it delicately by the handle with two of his thick fingers. His children looked at him resentfully, and Altea wondered what they hated more: their father or the memory of their mother.

The women hadn't spoken to each other all dinner, and Altea, despite her natural reserve, felt the need to empathize with the girl who was expecting, at any moment and when they were alone, a reprimand from her boyfriend. She tried to approach her, but the girl kept glancing at Antonio, who, however, ignored her.

"Don't worry, my dear," Altea said, taking hold of her elbow. The girl was sweating, and she wondered when she would faint. But María Elena held on until the time when Antonio was supposed to take her home. They both left, and Mendoza would take advantage of their absence. He knew Antonio feared that, and would leave his girlfriend quickly to return.

Mendoza was willing to stay awake to talk business with Don Fermín.

"Lorenzo, go to bed, tomorrow you have to take us to Santa Lucía," he told him.

The boy looked at his father, pleading to stay, but was met with another refusal. He must have felt he'd drunk as much as the others, and that's why he was part of the family and the business. That's what his face said, but it also said he was helpless without his brother's intelligence. His knack for numbers was a circus act that Antonio exploited. He got up reluctantly and left, slamming the door. Duque had followed him.

"I'll leave you two alone..." Altea said.

"Dorotea will tell you the room; the captain always sleeps there," said Don Fermín.

"I'll sleep on a cot at the business, don't worry about me..." Máximo Mendoza's voice was more conspiratorial than that of a formal lover, and that made her feel good.

She ran into the old woman returning from the kitchen to clear the table. Without a word, she led her to the guest room. It was a spacious room with old, piled-up furniture. The high ceilings were cool, the bed had a comfortable mattress, and there was a basin of cold water. A mirror on a wardrobe door reflected her figure. Her face was tired and dark-circled; she felt old and without a future. What she had thought she felt for Mendoza not long before had been eclipsed by the sight of that guest room in a provincial town. With the Indians, she had felt useful, and she hadn't sought identification or comfort from them, but rather a kind of energy that enabled her to keep living each morning. But before this antique mirror, dimly lit by candlelight, at one in the morning, knowing she was pregnant and loathing her child, looking at her wasted body, she felt the desire to end it all that very night. What was she doing in a country devastated by caudillos and bad politics? What was she doing married to a man she had never truly loved—she was now certain of that—and with the child of rape? She thought of her mother, widowed and pregnant, with her delicate beauty, her fair complexion, and her almost white hair, on the coast of Denmark, gazing at the sea that had taken the only man she had ever loved. Altea had loved her father through her, through his image in the portrait hanging on the wall, through his books on the library shelves, through the scientific manuscripts kept in the desk drawers, through the memories and anecdotes of those who visited the widow and her daughter. Her marriage to Manuel, her arrival in America, were clear signs that she had tried, without any method, to achieve an imitation, because she knew from the beginning that any original quality was beyond her reach. At least that was what she thought, and the only thing she could ever reproach her mother for. But how could she be accused of something that was more a merit than a fault in her character: loyalty to the memory of an irreproachable man? Her father had died prematurely, but perhaps also in time to avoid any chance of tarnishing the memory that would be paid to him.

She looked at herself in the mirror again, and suddenly saw, on the upper left edge of the oval mirror, a face watching her, peering out of the

bedroom doorway, almost five meters away, because the room was spacious, and separated only by an empty space where an indigenous woven rug lay on the wooden floor. She looked at the rug through the mirror; it was like a piece of jungle between Don Fermín's youngest son, Lorenzo, and her. Crossing those five meters was like entering a swampy terrain where she could even hear the hysterical cries of tropical birds and smell the dampness and decay. She wouldn't turn around, wouldn't show any sign that she had seen him. The dog was surely beside the boy; even if she couldn't see him, she could smell him and even hear his panting. But was it the animal or Lorenzo who was panting?

She turned her head slightly, pretending to fix her hair, and noticed that Lorenzo had leaned out a little further, resting one hand on the doorframe. Half his body was inside the room, his torso bare, and his other hand inside his trousers, or perhaps long underwear; she couldn't be sure, but it was the most likely explanation.

Altea wasn't going to scream or ask for help, she had already decided that. She slowly unbuttoned her dress, never taking her eyes off the mirror, watching her every move. She bared her shoulders and lowered the dress to her waist, then the skirt, lifting one leg and then the other, and tossed it to the floor. She noticed a sudden movement in the mirror's reflection, heard her breathing quicken, and saw the hidden hand move.

The candlelight was fading, but she was stimulated by the sight of him restless, glimpsing in the approaching darkness the body she desired more and more and which she might see very clearly in a few minutes.

Altea was covered only by her white petticoats, narrow at the chest, wider below the waist. They reached below her knees, and then she bent down slightly to take off her stockings. She slid them down slowly, glancing in the mirror now and then, alert to any sound or footsteps from Lorenzo. The boy was perspiring; she could smell the sweat that must be dripping onto his sparse beard. She straightened up again, gazing at her reflection in the mirror, running her hands over her bodice, hinting that she would soon remove it. She waited, like the slow countdown before an explosion, always waiting, postponing the precise moment before the blast, taking a risk, perhaps futilely. Perhaps she would lose again, but this time it would be by her own choice, and with the pleasure of having subjected the boy to that torture. The man, really. She was a picture of ice streaked with blue and

yellow, by the grace of the candlelight. He was an iceberg of conflicting emotions trapped inside a dormant volcano. He was made of stone, a statue, yet he could unleash a man's violence to the very last breath.
And she had a brilliant idea: she walked to the table by the bed, where the flower Don Fermín had given her lay, the flower they called a cockscomb. Large and red, she held it in her hands to her crotch, and returned to the mirror. She looked at herself, still, confident, commanding, and beautiful. She heard Lorenzo's quick footsteps, first on the wood, then on the carpet. Like a half-naked native running through the jungle toward his prey, accompanied by his hunting dog. She felt him run those few meters just as she had seen the Indians move while she taught in Toba, swift and stealthy. She knew that in a few seconds she would be attacked. She saw Lorenzo's body approaching, tall, with dark hair on his chest as white as milk.
Then she slammed her fist against the mirror and closed her eyes. The glass shattered and crashed to the floor, the crash loud enough to soon announce the sound of two men's footsteps in the hallway. Lorenzo was already on top of her, grabbing her from behind, while Altea clutched her chest and cowered like a defenseless bird. Her hair was tangled and disheveled, like the feathers of a wounded bird. She felt a struggle around her, the men's shouts and insults. She was tossed from one side of the room to the other. She didn't want to open her eyes, but she could clearly hear what was happening. Mendoza's arms were trying to tear Lorenzo's hands from Altea's skin, their fingers fighting and intertwining. She fell to the floor.
"No, Captain! Leave it to me!" he heard the old man shout.
Mendoza helped Altea to get back on its feet.
- Are you OK?
She nodded, but rubbed her shoulders; her skin was bruised and swollen. Mendoza stroked her affectionately, a look of fear and anger in his eyes. She glanced around. Don Fermín had grabbed his son by the hair and was shaking him furiously.
"You had to come out like that, you son of a bitch!" he said in Catalan, but repeated it several times in Spanish, because he seemed to reserve his native tongue for happy moments. For arguments and outbursts, Spanish was the appropriate language.

He slapped him with one hand without letting go of his hair with the other. The boy didn't rebel; he seemed to have lost his strength and stature in the face of his short, fat, and burly father. But for a moment he managed to say:

- You're a fucking old man!

Don Fermín kept pulling his hair; for a moment it seemed he would make it bleed. He dragged him out of the room, and they heard them shouting down the hall. Then there was the slam of a door. And nothing more.

Altea and Mendoza remained seated on the bed. He tried to comfort her, to say something she didn't want to hear. Max appeared injured, with some of the fur on his back pulled out. He sat at their feet, but he had difficulty moving.

"You got what was coming to you too, poor Max," Mendoza said, stroking his head. "Looks like he had a fight with Duque to defend you. We saw them in the hallway before we went in."

Altea had curled up in his arms, not crying, only trembling slightly. She was still wearing her petticoats, and her dress barely covered her breasts. She could feel them shuddering against the captain's body. He was almost cradling her, supporting her, cupping her bruised shoulders with one arm, while with the other he stroked the dog. Then they fell back onto the bed. Both stared at the ceiling, where a few spiders crawled, and laughed. They didn't know what they were laughing at, but they laughed uncontrollably. And Mendoza, as the only way to stop that laughter, decided to kiss her. Altea felt her body convulse, and he stood up and leaned against her, not hurting her, barely using his weight as a shield. And he kissed her lips and face, then her bare neck that smelled of the jasmine from old Fermín's garden. He kissed her breasts through her petticoats, but soon removed them, knowing she wanted the same as he did: to find each other's naked bodies, without permission or hindrance. When they saw each other through the skin and sweat of that hot night, in the dim light, because the candles had already gone out, they heard the cries of the children and the father, while the two of them searched for each other in their bodies, delirious with images that came from none of their senses. An ecstasy like a boat on a turbulent river, subjected to the rigors of the wind and the storm, to the whim of God and the obsessions that plague the minds of men.

When he left her, the night was beginning to end. Althea felt, suddenly and with a chill, that someone might be dying as the night died, far from them as the swaying boat was, dying like a poor sick person on the River Styx. Perhaps, on the same boat, awaiting the call of Acheron, or perhaps even calling it. But they were on this side of the world, with souls that recognized the difference between day and night, because they had once again survived the wandering of darkness. Their hands had touched, body to body, possessors of the soul. They knew, now, that the soul is an organ of the body, a place that moves from space to space through the veins. And when the body died, the soul atrophied like a dry seed. That was God when man died.

Altea and Máximo fell asleep at dawn. The dog had climbed onto the bed, with some effort, and also fell asleep between their naked bodies. For a moment he rested his snout on Altea's thigh, then on Mendoza's belly. He seemed determined to choose, but this time he didn't take either of their souls.

*

When she awoke, she saw Máximo sitting on the bed, his back against the wall, a folder of balance sheets resting on his bent knees. With a short pencil, he meticulously reviewed the columns of numbers. He was still naked, and that body was a sight for sore eyes. He tidied her hair and beard and rested his head on her shoulder. He smiled at her and kissed her, but made a subtle gesture of annoyance. Altea pulled away and covered herself with the sheet. She looked out the window; the shutters hadn't been closed during the night, and now the morning light streamed in, intense and full, reflecting off the broken panes and illuminating the open wardrobe where the mirror had been. The flower lay withered on the floor.

"Are these your godfather's accounts?" he asked.

Mendoza nodded, without looking at her.

- Have you found any irregularities?

He sighed and closed the paper.

"None, but Lorenzo, despite his apparent stupidity, is very skilled at these calculations, and I'm practically ignorant. And Antonio manipulates it as he pleases; that's strategic intelligence. I don't know what he expected to find. If the trap were so obvious, Don Fermín would have noticed, or anyone else."
"What's the problem with those boys?" Altea knew that this conversation was an excuse, because both of them had their minds on something else underlying: she on wanting to stay in that bed forever, with that man, and he on those unfinished accounts.
-Your mother is the problem.
- How did he die?
-She didn't die, she lives in Santa Lucía. Don Fermín kicked her out of the house. I think the boys still see her from time to time, at least Antonio does.
- And why did he fire her?
-Because you're a witch.
Altea laughed.
"It's true, not that she's a witch, I mean he kicked her out for that reason. But people in town always said she had special abilities, and after being married for almost ten years, this house was a hell of arguments and fights. The only thing that's certain about her is that she performed abortions for the town and the surrounding area."
Altea leaned forward on the bed to look him in the eyes.
- Are you going to take me to her?
-I don't know if she's still working there, there's someone else, I was told...
- Is that why we came to Don Fermín's?
She didn't understand the real motives behind the strategy, if indeed that was what it was, Máximo's strategy. She had a feeling, but the uncertainty irritated her.
"Men," he said, watching her close in again on the cold mist that would soon turn to ice, "when it comes to you women, we feel a tremendous guilt that makes us make mistakes. We do unnecessary things, present complicated arguments, and ultimately offer long and useless excuses. But the disapproving look from women is a stigma for some of us."
Altea's expression didn't change; they could have been harboring benevolent thoughts or the most stubborn resentment. He got up to dress, silently.

"I'd like to freshen up before going out," she said.
-I'll tell the old woman to prepare a bath for you.
He went outside and greeted someone in the hallway. Everyone already knew they had slept together. What face would he make in front of those guys, especially Lorenzo? He felt shame and a burning anger. He wanted to leave that house as soon as possible, a house full of men who understood each other with codes of hatred, yet lived in perfect peace. Because the blows they exchanged were nothing more than momentary outbursts, while their relationships with women suffered from irrevocable resentment.
Dorothea arrived. She followed her to the bathroom, where the large bathtub was filled with warm water. The old woman bustled about, arranging the towels, soap, and perfumes that looked as though they hadn't been taken out of a cupboard in a long time.
-All this is not necessary, Dorotea.
The old woman, always silent, shrugged and left, closing the door behind her. Altea locked it. The door was wooden, with frosted glass in the upper half. She hung a towel up to shield herself from prying eyes and undressed. The water was warm and felt good. She closed her eyes and saw the stained water. She opened them, and the bathwater was clear. She feared for herself; if she was bleeding while pregnant, it meant things weren't right. She thought about her first periods as a teenager, the terrible fear they caused her, until her mother explained the truth. But the bathwater was clear and full of soap suds. Water and blood? She dismissed the thought and began to dry herself and get dressed. She went back to her room to get her things ready. She would go have breakfast; she was hungry.
Don Fermín, Máximo, and Antonio were seated in the dining room. Lorenzo hadn't appeared all morning. The old man got up with excessive care and attention toward her. He no longer mixed in any Catalan expressions; these accommodating personalities of the old man were curious: the Spanish gentleman, the powerful merchant, the frail old man dominated by his sons, the tyrannical father.
"My dear lady, please take a seat to my right." He kissed her hand and led her to the seat. Mendoza, who was already there, stood up and took the chair next to him. Antonio greeted her sarcastically, without saying a word.

"There's no need to mention what happened last night, Don Fermín," she said, achieving the effect she wanted. She saw the father and son looking at each other, sniffing something in the air, and realized it was the perfume she was wearing. It must be the same one the boys' mother had used many years before.
The old man cleared his throat, sat back down, placed his napkin on his lap, and continued eating breakfast. No one said anything until they had finished. Altea's teacup was empty, Máximo's mate was cold and the kettle almost empty, and the coffee cups that Fermín and Antonio had drunk from several times were dirty and had remnants of the cookies that Dorotea had been baking since early morning.
"We must go, Don Fermín. But first we must take care of some formalities," said Mendoza. He stood up and went to get his travel bag. He took out a leather bundle and handed it to Antonio across the table.
"Please, Captain... let's not sully the family table with business," said the old man.
-This settles my godfather's debt. I consider the debt to be with his son; this way we separate the good from the bad.
Antonio burst into loud laughter.
"You must have theatrical ancestors, Captain. It must be your family's great lineage, oozing from your very being." And he began to applaud. Mendoza leaned across the table and started to stretch his arms toward the boy, but the old man stepped in front of him.
- Please, gentlemen!
Antonio got up and picked up the money.
-I'll give the receipt to the colonel as soon as I see him.
Don Fermín spoke before the captain:
- *Don't worry , I promise to take care of it.*
Altea reflected on that opportune use of Catalan. The men went their separate ways: Antonio disappeared down the inner corridor, Don Fermín went out to take charge of the transport he had arranged for their journey, and Máximo and Altea went out into the courtyard. The garden was bright, and the cockscomb trees remained enormous and always dark. The dog accompanied them, limping, and Mendoza helped him up after assisting Altea, who adjusted the skirt of her dress to fit the narrow space. Max lay

down in the back, with the captain's bag and Altea's small carry-on suitcase.
-I'll return it to you in a few days.
Don Fermín made a gesture of nonchalance.
"Keep it as long as you like, Captain, it belonged to my late wife." He said goodbye to Altea with a kiss on her hand.
When they had walked a long way off, she said:
-If only I had something to clean myself with…
Mendoza, who was holding the reins, laughed loudly. Max raised his head and wagged his tail, then settled himself between them on the driver's seat. They made room for him, and Altea stroked his wounded back, which was beginning to heal.
The horse was a bay, no longer very young, it went slowly, and it had to be spurred on from time to time.
"How far away is Santa Lucía?" Altea asked.
-About sixty leagues more or less.
She sighed, resigned to the discomfort of the entire journey in that small, cramped sulky, which would take them at least two or three days. The morning had dawned clear and sunny, and even when they left Lavalle, leaving the town and its last streets behind, the sun was still shining. But soon clouds began to fill the sky from the west, first white, then darker, and by mid-afternoon, they covered the entire sky, and it had begun to get chilly. She turned to find her suitcase and placed it on her lap while Max rummaged through its contents.
"Stay still!" she told him, and he looked at her with tender eyes and his tongue sticking out. Altea wasn't in the mood for condescension, so she pushed him back, while the dog resisted. Mendoza watched them and smiled, and Altea challenged him just as she had challenged the dog. When she finally managed to get the animal to lie down, she took a wool sweater from her suitcase and covered herself.
"Do you want a coat?" he asked the captain. The captain shook his head, glancing up at the sky from time to time.
"It's going to rain before nightfall; we'll have to find shelter. A few kilometers away is the farm of one of my cousin's tenants."
It was five in the afternoon, perhaps, when they saw a dark line appear from the west, at first very thin, which then lengthened and took the form

of a flock slowly approaching. Altea pointed it out with one hand, the other resting on him. They were bats in broad daylight, and curiously, on the eve of a storm.
- Are they coming from Paraná?
Yes, but they're originally from Brazil. They come down at this time of year and leave their young. Then they all return north in the winter. That's why it's rare to see them so far from the river; there are few trees in this area, only scrubland and caves.
-So they flee from the storm…
"It seems so..." he said, and then said nothing more for a long time.
The bats dimmed the afternoon light a little more. Their wingbeats could be heard clearly in the distance.
"You'd better cover your head, they're going to pass by here. It's a shame we didn't get to the farm sooner..."
-You're afraid for the horse…
He nodded.
"I don't know this chestnut horse, maybe he'll get scared, maybe he won't. Tie the dog up, he's capable of jumping when they arrive."
Altea tied Max up with a rope, then covered her head with the sack. She looked up at the sky; they were very close now, and they were descending. She grabbed an old poncho that had been left at the back of the sulky and covered Mendoza's head. He smiled gratefully and took her hand, while with the other he held the reins.
Then the bats began to descend. They could see their curious little monster faces, because at night it was impossible to distinguish them. Their wings struck them, their bodies collided with them and the sulky. Altea heard Mendoza shouting at the horse to stay still, and the horse whinniing. The cart shook, stopping and gathering momentum with the restlessness of the chestnut horse. Max barked, but hid under the driver's seat. Altea didn't want to scream, but she was frightened. She felt something like bites on her arms, but she didn't think it was possible. She closed her eyes until the flock passed. It all happened in a matter of a few minutes, but the sensation lasted much longer.
When they were free, he looked up and saw them disappear to the east. The cart was stopped in the middle of the field, the horse shaking its head and snorting. He looked at Máximo, who was gripping the reins tightly, his

hands showing the tension in the veins, marked like rivers on the backs of his hands.
"It's over now..." she said, trying to comfort him, but she couldn't understand such fear in a man like him.
"I don't know..." Mendoza began. "I felt fear... or I wonder if it was terror... but don't mind me..." His face, however, couldn't escape that feeling.
Two hours later it began to drizzle, and a short while later the rain was torrential. There was a small eucalyptus grove nearby, and they withstood the downpour for two kilometers. Even under the trees, the rain felt heavy.
"Get under the cart," the captain said. She did, taking the suitcase and the dog with her, while she watched Maximus take the harness off the horse and tie it to a post. Then he sat down next to her. Shoulder to shoulder, they looked into each other's eyes, smiled, and kissed. She scratched one arm, then the other.
- What's happening?
-Nothing, it's just that for a moment I thought I had been bitten.
"Let's see..." he said, trying to lift the sleeves of her dress.
"You won't be able to..." She unbuttoned the top buttons of her shirt and revealed one shoulder. There were two bite marks. She looked at the other, and there were three.
"Good heavens," he said. "It's very strange that they do this; it must be the *myotis..."*

- What's that?

"One of the species was discovered by some German explorers many years ago. My grandfather met a man named Schinz back in the 1920s, who stayed in Santa Fe." "Please stay still for a moment; I need to put some leaves on your bites."
Altea saw him get up and search through the grass. Max tried to lick her wounds, but she chased him away. She wasn't afraid yet, but she saw it coming and growing inside her, just as she had seen the flock from the sky above the river. She watched Max's every step, which was slow, as he carefully searched through the grass.
"What are you looking for?" she asked, irritated. He just waved his hand patiently. She watched him approach the horse and check it over. "Now he's worrying about the animal while I'm waiting for him," she thought angrily.

After a while he returned with a paste of leaves which he smeared on the wounds, covering them with the fabric of the white clothing she had in her suitcase.
- Do you think they're furious?
"No!" he replied, almost in a shout with which he evidently tried to cover up, expel and destroy that feeling of the almost inevitable.

Darkness and night fell. Altea was asleep, and he held her close to his chest. The dog lay beside them, shivering. The rain continued heavy and steady. He should have anticipated the problem with the rain and asked Don Fermín for a larger vehicle, he told himself. But he was too used to traveling alone, enduring any hardship and covering great distances across the countryside, day or night, with only his horse. But what worried him now were those bats, because he knew that species were blood-sucking. Altea trembled for a second, and he touched her forehead. It was cold. Before falling asleep, she had asked if the horse was all right. “Yes,” she had answered, “it’s hard to pierce the hide of an old, shaggy bay like this one.” But the more she had tried to downplay the situation, the more obvious her fear became.
As soon as dawn broke, he took out the provisions old Fermín had given them for the journey, wrapped in a cloth bag, and set about preparing a fire near a tree. Everything was damp, but at least it had stopped raining. He heated water and prepared a mate. The yerba was dry, as was the bread. He smelled the piece of cheese old Dorotea had made and cut off a piece. He left everything ready by the fire.
"Don't you dare come any closer," he told Max. The dog was looking at him with sad eyes, still pitiful after the fight with the other one, but safe from the bats. He went to wake Altea. She opened her feverish eyes, but she wasn't trembling. Her muscles were stiff from the position she had slept in.
"I prepared a country breakfast," he said apologetically.
She looked at him ironically, wondering what she'd been eating while she was in Toba with Manuel. But when they reached the fire with the old kettle, a wooden plate of bread and cheese, and the dog sitting beside them, waiting for a bite, she smiled. Never, not even in Cádiz, had a breakfast seemed more appetizing than this one. She smelled the aroma of the eucalyptus trees under which they had sheltered, the scent of grass and

damp earth. She accepted the mate from Captain Mendoza, the captain of a great ship and a member of an old Creole family, who was preparing the mate and a piece of bread with cheese whose aroma brought back memories of times she had never known. Not Denmark, not Spain, only the countryside where they now stood, the trees, the overcast sky, a beautiful dog, and an old horse. And before her stood a man in whose face she found, for an infinitesimal instant she would never forget, a contemplative peace.
They resumed their journey shortly after. Her arms and legs ached, so he helped her onto the horse and covered her with the poncho. She watched him assemble the horse's harness, while he checked her skin, trying to be discreet so Altea wouldn't worry. The animal would be more resilient than she was, if she had been unlucky enough to get an infection.
"How much longer?" she asked, even though she had resolved not to pressure him any further.
-Quite a lot, but we'll stay and rest at Don Facundo's place, I already told you about him.
The sulky emerged from beneath the trees and submitted to the stale sky. It was drizzling, but bearable. During the morning, Mendoza had erected a small awning over the driver's seat. After midday, it began to rain again, and lightning flashed like large, obsolete lamps blinking endlessly on the horizon.
- Has the river overflowed?
He shrugged.
- Did something bad happen to the ship?
-Stop worrying. We're too far behind to go back now, especially not in the conditions we're in.
"I'm sorry, Máximo. I'm not usually like this, but suddenly, I don't know..."
She felt vulnerable because she was cold. She tried not to tremble so as not to worry him, but her words, which she couldn't control, only had the opposite effect. She didn't want to be a timid little woman clinging to her man's trousers to be dragged around like an annoying, babbling bundle, but that's exactly what she was doing.
The rain pattered on the awning, which sag, and he had to tip it to the side to avoid getting wet. Sometimes, the dog was left in the spray; they could see him better, and his wounds healed. In the mid-afternoon, they saw the farm. Willow and poplar trees surrounded the main house. As they

approached the gate, Mendoza was struck by the neglect of the surrounding land. There were no dogs to greet them, no farmhands, no activity whatsoever. The gate was open and broken. They walked past the house, but the solitude was so profound, and above all, the silence, that he couldn't help but lament a tragedy.
"Something has happened..." she said.
Taking a moment to answer, he said:
-At least we have shelter.
He helped her down, and suddenly a woman's voice shouted:
Stay where you are!
A fat woman with a shotgun was threatening them.
"I am Captain Mendoza, woman. And who are you? Where is Don Facundo?"
She dropped the rifle and ran towards them.
"Maximo!" she said, hugging him and crying.
-But woman...calm down...
She looked up, and he recognized Don Facundo Espinoza's wife. She looked so different that only in her eyes and expression could he find the tender gaze of that woman who, it was said, had fallen in love with the captain before marrying the rancher.
- Carmela...?
"It's me, Máximo, believe it or not, but let's go in." He looked at Altea suspiciously.
-She's a friend, Carmela, I can't hide anything from you.
-You couldn't even if you wanted to. Come in, ma'am, don't be afraid.
The room was almost empty, except for a table, chairs, and a wood-fired oven. Boxes of canned goods that smelled bad were scattered on the floor and against the walls.
- But what happened?
As she walked with difficulty, pulled the chairs closer and sat down, they saw that her ankles were dirty and swollen.
"You know Facundo liked to gamble... and well... we had a mortgage on the ranch. Then he started having a lot of liver problems, from the wine, what can you do... and the doctor said he shouldn't work so many hours straight in the fields, so we haven't been able to pay for the last two years."
-I already knew that...

"You lent us a lot of money, even though you didn't like me very much, I understand. Anyway, thanks to that we lived peacefully for a long time. But the government wanted to expropriate us, so Facundo took out another loan from the Valentes. Now the property belongs to them. They're letting me stay here out of pity."
- But how can you be alone? And where is your husband?
"Facundo killed himself. He hanged himself from that tree..." Carmela stood up, walked heavily to the door and showed them the broken trunk of a poplar tree that had once shaded the house.
"It was the first thing I saw that morning when I got up to fetch water. The body hanging there, and the dogs howling. So I grabbed the shotgun and killed them, so they'd stop crying. Because if I was willing not to cry, no one else would. Afterward, I took the big ladder and a kitchen knife, climbed up, and cut the rope. Then the farmhands came and looked at me. I shouted goodbye to them all; I didn't want anyone near. I dug a hole, as best I could—you know I'm not very strong—and I threw them all in, after dragging them, him and his dogs."
Altea remained seated, trembling, clutching her body with her arms and her head to her chest. Carmela said:
-You can see how I am now. I'm a wreck, Máximo, and I'm your age.
- And the boys?
They were spending that summer in Corrientes with my in-laws. At least Facundo had the decency to kill himself when they weren't there. We don't have a house anymore, so they're still there. They're dirt poor, but I don't want them around. They remind me too much of my father, and besides... what can I say...I'm ashamed for them to see me like this.
They stood in silence, staring from the doorway at the severed trunk of the tree she had chopped down the next day. Altea watched them, the woman clinging to Máximo's waist, him trying to embrace Carmela's endearing presence with his arm.
That night, around the table, they ate what was left of a cow the Valentes sent them from time to time. They talked about Natacha and Ariel. But Altea wasn't very inclined to listen. Carmela slept in the shed; the hay made the place warmer. They would sleep in the ranch house, on several old blankets left over from the double bed they had sold shortly before Facundo's death.

"It was the last piece of furniture we sold. It was beautiful; my parents gave it to us as a wedding gift. Do you remember when we went to pick it up at the port of Buenos Aires?" He turned to Altea to explain. "Imagine, it crossed the entire ocean from Madrid. They took it off the ship, and Facundo and Máximo put it on a big cart because it was a hand-carved piece of furniture, carved from a single piece of wood. We took it to the port of Ensenada, and from there upriver to here. That night was our wedding night."

Carmela smiled through her sobs, and Altea didn't know how to comfort her. Máximo saw that one was trembling with cold, sensing the worst, and that the other, now without any hope, was feeding on sorrow and memories. He decided they wouldn't stay there longer than that night. They would flee the sickness that lived in that ranch and find a doctor.

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Before dawn, they packed their things. Carmela had offered them a larger, though somewhat dilapidated, cart, but she couldn't provide any animals. The old bay horse was hitched to the cart, which required only minor repairs, and they left without saying goodbye to Carmela Espinoza. They knew she was probably watching them leave from the house, but they didn't turn around. Sometimes compassion is found closer in averted eyes and silence.

The morning was cold, and Altea was still wrapped in the poncho, loosely arranged according to the chills she felt. During the night he had treated her bites. They were still swollen.

Shouldn't she be with her children, despite what she thinks?

Last night he told me they were writing to him, but he never answered. In their last letter, they said they were going to Buenos Aires to try their luck, but who knows…

- Were you in love with her back then, I mean?

The captain glanced at him sideways, pleased by his jealousy.

"Never, but she was very pretty, you can still see it in those blue eyes and rosy cheeks. She was always a little chubby, but now…those veins in her legs, those hands that look broken, and the bitterness in her eyes…"
It continued to rain all afternoon. The horse moved more slowly. They should have found inns along the way, but with that rain, even the guard posts were closed. It would take them at least another day to reach Santa Lucía at the pace they were going. If only they could have found another horse…
It was probably after six in the evening when Altea fainted. Her body slumped forward, and she nearly fell between the horse and the cart. Máximo managed to grab her arm, stopped, and lifted her to lay her down in the back. He had been feeling weak since midday, but despite his advice to lie down, she had insisted on staying with him on the driver's seat. He covered her with one of the blankets Carmela had given them and resumed their journey. The dog lay beside her, watching over the road and its mistress, occasionally barking a couple of times, which soothed the captain's thoughts. He was thinking about the road they were traveling, once so familiar, but now changed by political events and the passage of time. Abandoned ranches, dead men, shantytowns that had been destroyed or burned, felled trees, and strange people.
Before nightfall, they crossed paths with some gauchos who looked at him with one hand on the reins and the other on the hilt of a dagger near their belt. He did the same, but his hand rested on his revolver. The saber remained faithful, in the cart, but like a static old man, unable to move. He couldn't trust the people he saw, because they were strangers. And in those lands, almost everyone was a stranger. Even an unwelcome glance could be cause for a fight. The Mendozas and Hurtadoes were already old and rancid; nobody liked them, at least not those who still remembered their own families. To the rest, he was just another guy they could get into a row with or steal something from.
One of the men he passed greeted him with a nod and his hands in the appropriate positions. The captain returned the salute and assumed the other was ready to attack him. He was about to draw his revolver and fire without hesitation, because he couldn't trust the swiftness of those gauchos' knives. But just as he was ready, he saw him raise his head and look toward the back of the cart. His expression changed suddenly. He

turned his eyes toward Mendoza, whom he knew was watching what he was doing, but his tense gaze dropped, and he could even perceive a relaxation in his shoulders and back. When Máximo saw that the danger had passed, the gaucho was already riding away, almost bent over his bay horse, his back bent with the rhythm of the slow trot, gently tapping the horse's flank, perhaps thinking of that stranger who was taking his sick wife and a dog that was helping him. He wasn't going to attack that man, he wasn't going to pick a fight with him. Perhaps that's what she thought, Mendoza told himself, or perhaps she had simply been as afraid as he had been.

That night they reached the bank of a stream. He lit a fire, prepared some meat from Carmela's ranch, and built a canopy for the cart. Thus covered, Altea felt calmer and accepted a few sips of water, but she refused to eat. Now she truly had a fever. The dress already smelled bad from perspiration, so he changed her, drying her skin before putting on the clean dress. Altea's white skin was reddened on her face and where she had been bitten, but the rest of her body looked pale and cold. She gazed at him tenderly, stroking his hair as he dried her or tried with care and patience to put on the dress with its complicated buttons and clasps. His clumsy hands struggled, but sometimes they gave up, and then she would tell him not to worry, that she was hot. But he didn't want to leave her exposed to the night's dew and the sudden chill of the morning. He lay down beside her and fell asleep resting an arm on Altea's chest, whose breathing, interrupted by coughing, took on the irregular rhythm of a music that surely had not yet been invented.

He was awakened by the neighing of several horses, Max's barking, and then several shoves on his shoulder. The gaucho he had crossed paths with last time was standing on the cart, pushing him with his foot.

"Hey, buddy. It's already noon. Where are you going?" Max kept barking at him. "Get out of here, damn it, if you don't want a whipping!" But the dog understood that he wasn't serious, and continued barking and wagging his tail.

Mendoza jumped up startled.

"Don't get worked up, friend. I brought you a couple of horses to speed things up, wherever you're going." And he pointed to two horses next to the gaucho's.

They got out of the cart. Mendoza splashed cold water on his head and rubbed his face.
Thank you so much for your attention, but I don't have anything to pay you with right now. When we get to Santa Lucía…
The gaucho shook his head.
"None of that. The lady is very ill," he said, pointing to Altea, who was still asleep. "When I got to my little ranch, I told my wife about the mishap. 'What are you waiting for?' she said. So I brought these horses, and in the saddlebags there are some things she gathered from what we ate last night."
Máximo stared at him. He was thinking about Altea, who seemed dead, and the gaucho's face held a sadness that made his throat tighten.
"Did you hear me, buddy?" the other insisted, looking at one of his ears as if he hadn't heard him.
Mendoza laughed.
-Yes, excuse me, friend, it's just that it's been a long time since I've been around these parts and I'm not used to such kindness.
The guy took off his hat and looked self-conscious.
-Now I see that I am speaking to a gentleman, please forgive me for treating you like just another person, I mean…you understand.
Don't worry. What's so funny, buddy?
-Gualterio Gonçalvez, to serve you…
They shook hands.
-Strange name for a gaucho…
The other one laughed.
-Things my old man did, he came from Brazil and got together with my old lady, who was Indian.
- And how can I thank you for your attention and return the favors?
-Don't talk about it...just let me help you tie them to the cart and if you want, I'll accompany you for a while.
They tied up the horses and let the old bay rest beside the gaucho's. They resumed their journey, late in the afternoon. They rode in silence. The canvas awning flapped in the wind, and Gonçalvez made sure it didn't come loose. They rode quickly, but the rumble of the horses' expert trot was barely noticeable. It had stopped raining, but the sky remained overcast.

"Do you have children, Gonçalvez?" he asked. Mendoza's voice was like thunder to the gaucho's imposed silence.
-Two, buddy, but they killed them, I have one grandson left.
- And how was it, if I may ask?
-The military, my friend. They worked for the party, with the same dedication that I did for Don Justo, but the military came and killed them.
A long silence followed, broken only by the murmur of the stream they were approaching. Soon they would arrive at Santa Lucía.
- And what happened to the lady? If I may…
She was bitten by bats two days ago. I don't know if you saw them…
The gaucho reminisced.
-That's unusual around here, pal. What were they like?
-Like the ones that roam the Paraná at night, but those don't bite. The ones from the other day have black bodies, and they're big.
"I know, they come from Brazil. They've been coming down to these parts for a long time now because of the rains. They kill a lot of livestock, but I never knew them to bite people. There's a healer who cures that in the town where they go."
Mendoza paid attention.
- Do you know the name, friend?
-Of course. Aurora Valverde, that's the woman's name. She does spells, but she also heals. My girl knows her, but she hasn't spoken of her since she came back. She did a spell on her, I understand, compadre, you know, womanly things…
It was almost dark when they reached the first streets of the town. He stopped the cart and said to the gaucho:
-That's it, buddy. Give me back the chestnut horse; he's rested now, and we won't need him much here.
They changed the harnesses and the two horses returned to Gonçalvez's horse.
I don't know how to thank you…
-No question about it, it was a pleasure meeting a gentleman like yourself, Captain…
Maximo frowned.
- How do you know, if I didn't tell you?

"I already told you I was a soldier under Don Justo. I met Colonel Las Heras back then, and I still do him favors now that he's old. I saw you many times at your ranch when I was a boy. I only realized who you were today, because of the way you speak. You have the same dignified bearing you had back then."
Mendoza racked his brain. Could this gaucho be the same man who had taught him to care for sick horses, and with whom he had ridden around the surrounding ranches as a teenager?
"The same, compadre, at your service," said the gaucho, as if reading his thoughts. But it was his face he had read.
They shook hands tightly, and without letting go, he said:
-It was an honor to see you again, my friend. And my best wishes to the owner, who brought you back.
"That's right, she's right, compadre! They know..." And looking towards the cart, from where Altea was watching them with one arm resting on the edge, half asleep but attentive, with the dog licking her hand, he said:
"Take care of the lady, and say goodbye to her for me, I'm not worthy..."
And old Gonçalvez mounted his horse, turned around, and trotted off. The haunches of the three horses moved away at a syncopated rhythm, disappearing as night fell.

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Mendoza approached Altea:
- How are you?
-Very bad, Máximo. I don't have the strength for anything...
"Are you cold?" he asked, reaching for the blankets she had taken off. They were wet.
-No, for God's sake, I'm unbearably hot.
He grabbed her by the shoulders and she screamed.
Don't touch me!
It was almost night, but with a lamp she saw the swollen and bruised arms.
Altea began to cry, trembling with chills.
I think I'm going to die. I wanted to kill him... he's going to take me...

Maximo thought about comforting her with words, but it was more useful not to waste any more time and to find a doctor. He left the cart where it was, on the side of the road that led to the center of town. He walked until he found the first lit house and knocked on the door. Someone, from a window, asked who it was.

-I need a doctor urgently, please…

"There hasn't been one for months," the woman replied from the window, and was about to close it when Máximo held the shutter open.

- But who can I turn to then?!

The woman shrugged. It was useless for him to keep hitting her. He walked away down the same street and got the same response from some boys who were bullying a dog for fun, and from some drunks standing outside a tavern.

"Why do you need the doctor, if I may ask?" one of them inquired.

My wife is sick…

"Do you want us to heal her if you can't, pal?" They laughed. Máximo wasn't about to waste any time, but just as he was about to walk away, they grabbed him and started to struggle with him.

- What's wrong with you? Can't you have a child? We'll do it for you for free, buddy.

Then Mendoza started throwing punches, but there were three of them and they soon knocked him to the ground. He pulled out his revolver and aimed.

- Get rid of those fucking hiccups!

But the men mocked him, and Máximo fired. They stood still, staring at him in amazement; their fright soon passed, though they made no attempt to approach.

- And what's wrong with the lady, if I may ask, pal?

-She was bitten by bats…

The men looked at each other, and like a reflex, they moved away from Mendoza.

-Then the healer has to see her, compadre, if she survives…

- And where is it?

- At the end of the street, where the cobblestones end.

Mendoza got up and started walking in that direction, keeping a watchful eye on the men, his gun still in hand. When he thought he was far enough

away, he began to run. One, two, three blocks, and the cobblestones continued. The houses of the town center lined up one after another, large and small, shops with dark or brightly lit storefronts. There were still people in the street, men and women alone or in pairs. They looked at him curiously as he ran like a madman, sweating in the cold night breeze. Dogs barked at him, and some children who had been playing in the street suddenly went home. He heard someone say, "He's going to the witch's house," but perhaps it was just an echo in the wind, and he could never be sure if he imagined it or if it was true.

The witch's house, he thought. Neither he nor his friends, when they were boys, had ever dared to even go outside that house where the mother of the woman who now lived there had, so they said, killed her husband. They were boys from patrician or Spanish families who owned land throughout almost all of Santa Fe or Entre Ríos. They went from one ranch to another and did whatever they wanted. Sometimes they even went as far as Santa Lucía, out of curiosity to see the place where the murder had occurred. It wasn't common for a woman to have taken her husband's shotgun and killed him in bed while he slept. The press had talked about her for several weeks, and people throughout the province were talking about what had happened at the trial. The daughter was a teenager named Aurora. Everyone felt sorry for her at first, but when they saw her for the first time at the town hall, her face full of pride and contempt, they feared that when the mother was executed, her soul would be reincarnated in the daughter. That's what Aurora's eyes told us, according to the women, because the men only saw the girl's beauty: her slender figure beneath the white lace dress, the hat with a veil that further softened her features. Her mother was executed by firing squad three months later in Buenos Aires. It was during Rosas's last year in power, and they said he personally attended the ceremony. The church refused to bury her in consecrated ground, and it was the general who authorized her burial exactly one meter from the edge of the Flores cemetery. No one understood this act of mercy for a murderer, but her political detractors found a remarkable consistency in it. Aurora inherited the house; she had no other relatives. No one offered to help her, and her mother's lawyer collected his fees from what the woman had saved in the Litoral bank. How would the girl support herself? That was the inevitable question for a while. Soon after, no one cared anymore

about what was happening in the house. The municipality paved the streets, but stopped at that house, and the town continued to spread and grow, except in that direction.

Máximo grew up hearing about that murder from time to time. He was still a boy, and he would ask: Why did she kill him? The older boys exchanged glances, united by silence. But his friends said she got rid of the husband when he found out Aurora wasn't his daughter. "Then whose was she?" he would ask. The boys would laugh and push him, saying, "The devil's!" He believed that answer for a long time, but then he grew up and thought he had forgotten about the whole thing. When he met Altea, he immediately thought of Aurora Valverde, the woman from Santa Lucía who, they said, could tell fortunes, performed magical cures, and collected aborted fetuses in her house. He suddenly remembered not that she was the devil's daughter, but what was said about her: her beauty, her intelligence, her malice, her silence, and the strange noises the aborted children made in the formaldehyde-filled tanks.

That's why they had docked in Lavalle and had taken Altea with them for the entire journey to Santa Lucía. He hadn't told her who it was; it was only tacitly understood that they were going to where she would have an abortion, because that was Altea's wish. And he, who knew that Manuel wasn't the father, felt he had to do what Natacha hadn't: get rid of the offspring. Ariel wasn't his son, and he knew, though without words, who the father was. Helping to eliminate Altea's child was like making Ariel cease to exist. Ariel was a germ, Ariel was a sick child, and he loved him out of pure pity. He couldn't rescue him or make him a man, because somehow the future seemed nonexistent for the boy. His mother surrounded him with a wall, stunted him as if trying to return him to her womb. Ariel was an animal she possessed. She devoured him with her religion, using images of Christ as if he were a cannibal or a pedophile: whatever would do to keep Ariel under her spell. She wouldn't let him out, as if her womb were a coffin, or a fishbowl full of formaldehyde, where she preserved the corpse—a living corpse—of the being she idolized, her Polish father. Krakowsky, like the sickly child he had been as a boy, according to the memories the old man had told Natacha. The winters in Warsaw had almost killed him, but they had also strengthened him. The intimate warmth of his father's house was like the warmth of his soul, the rooms

closed, the hearth lit in each one, the intimacy beneath the thick sheets and blankets. And beneath them, the people. And beside them, some empty room.

The house at the end of the cobblestone street was an old colonial mansion from the time of the viceroys. He stood before the entrance, between two columns of the arcade flanked by large planters with plants he couldn't identify, but whose branches cast shadows that moved with the night breeze across the barred windows. Grilles with bulbous edges and iron flowers covered the windows all along the facade. The tiled roof seemed to sag almost to the head of anyone standing in front of it. He knocked twice, hard. A lamp brought a flickering light from the window to the left, and the door began to unlock. The slowness of the process exasperated him, but finally the door opened a crack, and a woman's face appeared, barely illuminated.

"What do you want?" he asked.

-I'm looking for Aurora Valverde. My wife is ill and needs care.

- What's wrong with him?

-She was bitten by bats, I think *myotis bats* . And, what's more, she's pregnant.

The woman's head moved, searching around.

-He's in a cart at the entrance to the village.

He noticed that the woman had frowned.

- Did he leave her alone with the Benítez family hanging around?

Then he knew she was talking about the men who had attacked him, and he cursed himself, but he didn't have time to ask any more questions or run to find Altea. The woman's face was fixed on something behind him. Maximus turned around and saw the flames. The cart was being dragged by the horse, which was running wildly down the middle of the street, unable to break free from what looked like a chariot of fire.

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The Benítez twins were troublemakers because they had nothing better to do than go from town to town looking for fights. Today it was Santa Lucía,

yesterday Goya or Lavalle, tomorrow Corrientes or Concordia. They were the sons of a rancher, and they hung around with others not as rich as they were, but who clung to them like ticks. Besides, they needed them. They were capable of inventing anything to annoy others on their own, but sometimes they needed help. People said that everyone in that family was born with trouble in their blood, and that it was part of that perversion, according to them, that in every generation there was a pair of twins. Whoever the women they married, a pair was always born, and they were usually the worst, and as a family tradition, that's how they were treated, from birth.

So they grew accustomed to following the path of what tradition dictated, and it wasn't too difficult for them because it was in their blood, that much was clear. Fighting and looking for trouble. As boys, they broke things; as adults, they started fights or set traps to ensnare anyone, at least when they weren't drunk. If they were drunk, their behavior resembled that of any rowdy drunk, and that was better than seeing them sober, because then their malice was more insidious and effective. When they got into serious trouble and ended up in jail, the ranch foreman would come and bail them out with a wad of pesos, and everything was sorted out. Their parents were usually in Europe, and by the time the ranch foreman wrote to them, the news about the Benítez boys was already old news.

The night they confronted Captain Mendoza, they were surprised by the revolver. They used knives in their daily lives, reserving firearms for hunting. Being cunning men, they used their brains, and sometimes their hands. When they saw Mendoza, they were completely drunk, having only arrived in town that afternoon. No one refused them anything, and even if they didn't have any money to pay at the inn, the owners sent the bills to the Concordia ranch.

They let the guy, whoever he was, walk away.

"Did you see that he had a stripe on his jacket?" said Joaquín Benítez.

"He must be a deserter, otherwise what would he be doing around here looking like that?" Delmiro replied, and stood there thinking in the middle of the street, as Mendoza's figure disappeared over the cobblestones. "Let's go see the soldier's wife."

The friend who was with them that night said:

-But if she was bitten by bats, I'm not going near her.

Delmiro Benítez gestured for him to get lost. "What are you so afraid of? Do you think he's going to bite us? He must be delirious with fever, and besides, we'll get our revenge on the guy."
The three of them retraced their steps down the street toward the village entrance. It was pitch black, and no one was around. The overcast sky was expanding into the distance, and the wind was getting stronger. There was only a single point of light several meters away, which grew larger until they reached the cart. They heard barking dogs, and then the deep, hoarse breathing of a woman lying down.
"Calm down, old man!" Joaquín said to the dog.
Max was in front of Altea, trying to prevent them from going up.
"We'll take care of this one..." Delmiro drew his knife, but the speed of his movement caused him to stumble against the dog's jaw. Benítez stepped back, half laughing, half wincing. The dog's teeth had bitten into the nerves in his wrist. As he pressed it against his body, he said:
- Burn it!
Joaquín Benítez began searching for branches and dry straw, while the other threw them into the cart. They could barely see the woman, who didn't move, and the dog kept barking, its paws planted firmly on the edge and the fur on its back bristling.
Then Delmiro took a flask from his pocket and threw it away as well. They heard the sound of the bottle breaking, and a faint cry from the shadows. He struck a match. His face lit up, expressionless, but latent with something his friend could never have defined, but which Joaquín understood. Throwing the match, the fire started, and they fled in different directions, but the twins stayed together.
Altea began to scream, and when she tried to get up or move away from the flames, her body stiffened and she could barely move her hands. Her arms felt heavy and her legs were almost rigid. Max kept barking at the fire, and the horse began to rear up, trying to free itself from the harness. The cart shook, and branches and straw shifted to one side, and the fire engulfed Altea, at least for a few seconds, as Max gripped the edge of the blanket that wrapped her with his teeth and began to pull. He backed away with effort until he fell from the cart. He stood on his hind legs and, placing his front paws on the edge, pulled at the fabric again with his teeth. Over and over, while the cart shook. He had just managed to free Altea's legs

when the horse began to run, pulling the cart with it. Altea's body fell to the ground because Max was still holding onto the fabric. When the horse walked away down the street, the dog dropped the blanket and approached its owner. It licked her soot-covered face.

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The cart approached the end of the street, clattering on the cobblestones, pulled swiftly by a desperate horse trying to escape the fire it was dragging along. The neighing of the horse mingled with the clatter of hooves and the wheels that still withstood the impacts and jumps over the stones, until it was just a few meters from the house's door. Máximo watched it pass like a ball of fire smelling of burnt flesh, and he felt as if the end of the world had suddenly arrived. The dark night was up above, but here in the street there was a hell that didn't seem to be pulled by a single animal, because the flames rose much higher than the size and height of the cart, and he even thought he saw the horse's eyes watching him in the fleeting span of the few seconds it took to pass. Then the cart continued on its way beyond the house, where there was no longer a road. The windows of the houses began to open, and men in nightclothes emerged, along with nearly naked children who had gotten up to witness this strange commotion at that hour of the night in the village. Some women came out in nightgowns with their hair braided, shouting for them to come back, but no one paid them any attention.

Maximus ran desperately after the cart, and when he saw it had stopped not far away, he smelled with exhausted clarity the aroma of burnt flesh, and all he could do was drop to his knees in the middle of the street, his hands covering his face, hiding the shame that seemed to want to display itself in its recalcitrant splendor across his entire face. But his body expressed it: the hunching of his shoulders, the rounding of his back, the trembling of his knees in the mud, and even those hands that seemed transparent, treacherous, revealing the extreme shame and the subsequent pain of guilt.

Fingers rested on his back, and said the same thing as the faint voice that resonated, yet louder than the crackling of the wood devoured by the fire: "Stupid!" said the woman who had followed him.

But then people started coming closer. Some men with blankets and wet hides to contain the fire passed by, barely deigning to glance at him. Then it was the boys who screamed.

"Look!" many voices said, over and over again, their voices spreading from the voices of the men who had contained the fire, and from others surrounding Maximus.

Máximo Mendoza stood up and turned around. The woman was watching him with furious, contemptuous eyes. The insult echoed clearly and distinctly in his ears, even though it had only been uttered once. The slowly dying flames continued to echo it in a tribal language, with sharp cracks and the popping of splinters. He looked back, toward where everyone was now looking, and saw some outstretched arms pointing toward the dark street from the village entrance. And from the depths of the night from which he had emerged in search of help, the dogs appeared, dragging with their mouths the cloth on which Altea lay. They moved slowly, but all at once, and at the front was Max, as if directing the effort. No one dared approach them, call to them, or touch them. They were his dogs, perhaps, and other strays. There were twelve dogs, including Max. Where had the others come from to help him? How did they know, if it wasn't him who called them with groans or barks?

They walked down the middle of the street, while on either side two uneven lines of children, women, and men formed, watching and whispering. Some old women crossed themselves. The dogs approached Mendoza, and when they were just a few meters away, they stopped and dropped the cloth. Max watched him with that familiar look of sweetness and indulgence, that sad look that transcended any other meaning. The others moved away, some with their owners, who were there among the gathered group, others skirting around legs and without bothering anyone.

Máximo Mendoza went to where Altea was. He barely dared to touch her, as if she were a ghost. She was alive and breathing heavily, almost suffocated by the smoke and soot that had filled her lungs. He kissed her dirty face desperately, not knowing if he was hurting her or taking away the fresh air she so desperately needed.

"Lazarus's dogs," Aurora Valverde said, and many looked at her, without asking her anything, simply walking away to return to their homes and their beds, because that matter was certainly no longer for them to interfere in.
"What?" Mendoza asked.
“The dogs that rescued Lazarus from his first death…” she said. “Take her to my house, I’ll go ahead.” She walked off, proud and indifferent to the whispers of the remaining onlookers. Máximo lifted Altea in his arms, first with extreme care so as not to hurt her, but when he felt her body light and almost stiff, he walked as fast as he could toward the house, stumbling once on the cobblestones that ended in front of the door, followed by Max. The interior was everything he expected to find, though he paid it no mind at the moment. A large room with a big, completely empty table, high-backed chairs adorned with Spanish ornaments, red-painted brick walls, and several tapestries woven by indigenous hands. The ceiling was high, with beams from which rustic lamps and many cobwebs hung. At the far end, a small altar held a crucifix and a Christ figure with limbs like logs. Aurora was waiting to lead him to the room where he was to put Altea to bed. He followed her; they crossed an inner courtyard with a cistern and grapevines, and many empty flowerpots, then entered a room that smelled damp, cold, and dark.
Altea opened her eyes and the light from the courtyard hurt her.
"Her eyes are burned by soot. Leave her in bed, and don't open the shutters. I'll bring water to clean her. I imagine she hasn't brought any other clothes..."
The suitcase must have burned…
"I'll give her something of mine. Undress her..."
Max had lain down with his head between his paws, his eyes darting around him, but he soon drifted off to sleep, and woke with a start when Aurora returned with two bowls of water and meat. She stroked his head, saying:
-You had a bad dream, didn't you?
The dog drank water desperately, and when the fountain was empty, he refused the food and lay down again.
-That dog has been through a lot because of you…

Mendoza nodded. He had already removed Altea's singed dress and begun to cool her body with fresh water. He did so like a grieving husband, far from the confident demeanor of a ship's captain. She seemed relieved, but made gestures of pain, not daring to complain, probably because she felt like she was in a strange house. Aurora grabbed another of the cloths she had brought and soaked it in the porcelain basin. Their hands cleaned Altea's skin, sometimes brushing against each other. A look from the woman brought him relief for the first time that night: after the contempt, he thought he had found understanding. The witch's blue eyes were dark, like the color of the deep sea; her brown hair was tied at the nape of her neck in a messy bun from which strands escaped, sometimes obscuring her face. She had rolled up her sleeves, and he could see her forearms darkened by the sun of the countryside, and her hands, strong but beautiful, like a pianist's. She had seen the old grand piano in the main room and wondered if she played, and if they would ever get to hear her. But was she the same woman who had a reputation as a witch, and whom everyone ran from as if she were cursed?

"Why don't you take a bath? And then rest in the next room. I have no servants to help you; you'll have to fill the tub yourself."

He was going to answer no, but her voice wouldn't allow a response. So he stood up and paused for a moment, holding his head.

"You didn't eat anything, did you? I'll leave some mate and biscuits I made this morning in your room. Don't be long, or the kettle will get cold."

Before leaving, he turned around and asked:

- Do you think he's going to be saved?

He did not deign to respond except with another question.

- Why did you come all the way to Santa Lucía?

Now it was he who did not wish to answer, even though it was obvious that he already knew.

-Because of the child. She was raped.

Aurora nodded.

-I'm telling you now, and I know she's listening to me, even if she closes her eyes, that I won't be able to do anything while she's in this state.

Maximo lowered his gaze to the floor.

- May I use the altar, with your permission?

She smiled.

"Of course, that's what it's for..." And she ignored him, continuing to wash Altea's body. When he closed the door, she was already choosing the nightgown she would put on her.
She walked slowly to the patio. Lamps illuminated the area, and she managed to fill several buckets with water. The pump handle squeaked with a pitiful whine, and she foolishly worried about making as little noise as possible. Who would she bother? Altea was beyond paying attention to disturbing sounds, in a state where the conversations of those talking around her bed must have filtered through like bats in her sleep. And especially the last words of that strange woman must have bitten her with a tenacious intensity.
In his room, he filled a large porcelain tub, undressed, and stepped into the cold water. The feeling of well-being was immediate, as was his ingrained habit of sleep. He thought he had forgotten to go to the altar, but right there in that room, on the wall opposite him, was a large cross. The remnants of faith instilled in his childhood still remained clear beneath the dust of years. Neither money nor disappointments, nor even despair, had managed to diminish the reliefs of the words etched in his memory. He wondered if the soul they spoke so much about was precisely that memory. He had read much of the philosophers of the new schools, who sought to dethrone God, and even God himself seemed to have abdicated in the 19th century. Science had banished him, as had the thousands of unburied dead from the countless battles where blood and gunpowder vied with no intention of surrendering.
She looked at the cross and missed God. An empty cross was as impersonal as an empty cradle or a coffin without an occupant. She missed the contorted Christs that fascinated Natacha; they suffered with undeniable clarity. They took upon their bodies the pains of men, and that was why they were so horrifying to behold. Prayers were said with heads bowed and eyes on the floor, not out of the profound respect of one who does not believe himself worthy to contemplate the pure beauty of the divine, but out of fear.
The empty cross was just a carved piece of wood, and after making the sign of the cross, he clasped his hands together and placed them on his stomach, beginning to pray. His naked body reminded him of the night he

had spent with Altea, and a semblance of excitement coursed through him. But he was too tired, and he fell asleep.
When he awoke, he was still in the water, and on the small table by the bed was a plate with cheese, wine, and bread. The woman must have come in; had she seen him naked? What did it matter, he told himself. He got up and dried himself. He drew back the curtain at the front door; it was still dark, but there was a faint light. It must have been almost dawn. He ate and drank something, and went to bed. He covered himself with the sheet and tried to sleep. And sleep dragged him, in rags, to place him in the middle of a path formed by chariots of fire that went round and round, eternally, until the horror became a habit, and the fire turned to ice, and his body became rigid like Altea's.
She heard the knocks on the door. The intense midday light entered the room, but she didn't open her eyes until she heard Aurora's voice beside the bed.
"I brought her clean clothes," she said, placing them on a chair.
Maximo looked at her, still sleepy.
"Thank you," he said. Then she left and came back in just as he sat down on the bed, without any sheets covering him. She was carrying a silver tray with the kettle, the mate gourd, and the biscuits.
He quickly covered himself, but she smiled.
-Don't worry, consider me as a nurse.
-But she's also a woman…
"Hardly anyone in town thinks that way about me, and I've gotten used to it. I'll leave him to change. They were my late father's clothes."
He made a gesture he couldn't help.
"You already know the Valverde family legend, I imagine. Should some old fabrics that no one has used for almost twenty years really concern you?"
She continued to surprise him with her independent and intellectual nature, which always responded with practicality and common sense. He was beginning to realize that he had taken for granted something he would never have accepted in the case of anyone else. First, he had incorporated into his understanding the legend of the supernatural, the very same one that was now crumbling. And perhaps even the initial charm that legend had bestowed upon him would transform into disillusionment.

She looked at herself in the mirror on the wardrobe. An old, worn frock coat, a ruffled blouse from thirty years earlier, and a bun that, after several attempts to tie it, she left on the chair.
As he went out to see Altea, he ran into Aurora, who gazed at him with astonishment in her blue eyes. They seemed as vast as the midday sky above the courtyard.
"He looks a lot like my father," she said, laughing at Máximo's expression. "Don't worry, my mother's ghost isn't haunting the house to kill you." She turned to go to the kitchen and heard her chuckle.
Disenchantment wasn't coming too close, he told himself.
He entered Altea's room. She looked the same as the night before, but now she was truly asleep. He stroked her hair and spoke to her, but her face was puffy and she didn't respond to his words.
"I've given him something to help him rest," Aurora said, coming in with a steaming cup. "He needs plenty of sleep to recover. The toxins from bats cause that spasm you felt in his muscles. It's like an unbearable cramp that would exasperate even a saint."
Máximo listened to her talk and drink her cup of mate cocido with milk.
"Did you have a good breakfast?" she asked, cupping her fingers around the rim of the wide mug and looking at him with an undefined expression.
Who was this woman? What lay behind the mask of cordiality? Mockery, sarcasm? These were the questions he asked himself as he answered.
- Yes, thanks.
Go and explore the town a bit, so you can get to know it. And please bring me something from the store, whatever you like, and I'll prepare it for tonight. Don't worry about her…
Mendoza left the house. He had slept soundly, and since he wasn't used to getting up so late, he was still drowsy, and the sun stung his eyes. He walked toward the remains of the cart. Only the metal frame and a few charred planks remained. The harnesses were burned, and the horse was gone.
"We buried him far away," someone told her. She thought she recognized one of the men from last night.
- What can I do with these remains?
"Just leave it there, why worry? In a few weeks there won't be anything left, people always find something useful. And the lady...?"

-It's still the same. Tell me, fellow countryman, do you think it was the Benítez family?
The man coughed, clearly uncomfortable. He wasn't about to speak ill of a family on whom the economy of the entire region might depend. He leaned close to Mendoza's ear and said:
-Leave things as they are. A dead horse and a lost cart aren't worth it.
Maximo rudely stepped aside.
- They could have killed her!
"It was you, my friend, he pulled out the revolver and provoked them. Many people could say the same..." He turned and walked toward the town's main street. Mendoza waited a while and followed the same path. He looked for a general store, while people watched him because of his clothes. Some of the old folks probably recognized the clothes of Aurora Valverde's father, the murdered man. Some boys tugged at the tail of his frock coat, but he ignored them. Passing a shop window, he looked at himself: his curly hair and the long beard that reached almost to his collarbones, his old-fashioned clothes, the deep circles under his eyes. It was a strange mix that provoked both respect and pity, but the weight of each remained to be seen.
He bought meat, flour, and potatoes. He needed to send a telegram to the provincial bank to request a money order; he was running low on cash after paying the Valentes. He returned home, followed by some rowdy boys who circled around him, shouting and singing an obscene song, something about the witch and him. He didn't flinch; he wasn't about to file a complaint in that town. He was exhausted, and guilt weighed heavily on him.
It was already mid-afternoon. She left the groceries in the kitchen and went to Altea's room. Her expression was more serene. Aurora was sitting far from the bed, in a shadowy corner; she hadn't seen her until she spoke to her.
- Did you buy anything?
- Yes, I left it in the kitchen.
- What would you like for dinner?
-I don't care, whatever you want.

She went out and returned shortly after with another steaming cup. Altea had opened her eyes and was looking at him tenderly. He kissed her and sat down on the bed.
"Now you're going to have something warm and light." Aurora offered her a spoonful of tea with milk, while Máximo helped her raise her head by adjusting a pillow. Altea sipped slowly, one sip at a time, while Aurora brought the half- full spoon to her mouth, wiping her lips with a napkin.
"You're an excellent little patient, and you'll be well soon."
Maximus noticed the obvious sarcasm in her voice, but he couldn't help but appreciate the beauty of her features and the commendable, even if only apparent or self-serving, hospitality she offered them both. Altea glanced at them alternately, but neither of them noticed what she might be thinking.
During the afternoon, Altea continued sleeping. Máximo sat in a chair in the patio, in the shade of the grapevine, with his legs stretched out and his hands clasped on his white shirt. Aurora arrived to bring the kettle and the mate gourd. While she prepared it, she said:
-I'm sorry for the teasing, I'm used to it…
-Don't worry, if I'm going to get worked up over some rude kids, I'm ready...
She nodded, handing him the mate.
I'll make a stew tonight with the meat you brought me. Thank you for your kindness; my finances aren't very plentiful.
-If I'm not being indiscreet, how do you maintain this house?
“Because of my father’s inheritance…” She laughed again; it seemed that ever since they had arrived, her humor had taken on sharp, sarcastic turns. “I know what you’re thinking: ‘I’ve found the cause of your mother’s murder.’ Everyone thought that, it was obvious, but people in provincial towns like to keep gossiping about others because their own lives are so… so…stupid… And well, they invented the legend that I’m the devil’s daughter because that’s more interesting than simply a crime for money.”
A long silence followed, broken only by the sound of the bombilla in the empty mate gourd, the creaking of the kettle handle, and the passing of carts in the street. A few birds let out a broken song.
- You're waiting for me to tell you the real reason for my father's murder, aren't you?
-I didn't say anything, excuse me…

-That's precisely why…- Her voice had become a little hoarse, and the beauty of her face took on a hue streaked by the passage of the afternoon light through the leaves of the grapevine.
"That morning, I was woken by a gunshot. I ran out of bed and headed straight for my parents' room." She said this while pointing with her left arm to the sequence of events on the house's floor plan. The room where she had slept as a child was the one Altea occupied, and her parents' room, where she slept now, was on the other side of the patio. "I crossed the patio barefoot and saw my mother through the open door of her room with the shotgun over her shoulder. I thought it was burglars, but when I went in, my father was lying on his back, his chest bare, with the hole the shotgun had made from so close range. The police said it was a point-blank shot, but I didn't understand anything. They took my mother away and locked me up in a children's home for the duration of the trial."
Aurora's face at that moment was a paragon of innocence, and Máximo even imagined taking the hand of the teenager who had witnessed the murder to comfort her.
-Afterwards, I was returned to the house, with a state guardian until I came of age. I was lucky that he was a decent lawyer, because now I would have nothing.
Another long silence.
"Was my mother crazy?" they asked me, of all people! What stupid people at the courthouse! If they'd asked me that in my village, I'd understand, but villagers are smarter than the officials on duty. Out on the street, nobody asked me anything; they just avoided me and condemned me, as if they'd read between the lines of the articles that had been in the press all that time. Or maybe they saw it in my face.
"Come on, Aurora, you're not going to make me believe this..." And Máximo laughed, his face changing into an expression of strange contentment. But when he was met with Aurora Valverde's rigid gaze, rising offended from her chair and gathering the snacks back onto the tray, he shut his mouth and watched her stride haughtily toward the kitchen, slamming the door behind her.
For the rest of the afternoon, he stayed to care for Altea. He spoke to her, even with her eyes closed, about what they would do when she recovered. He promised to make a deal with Natacha; she would surely eventually give

in, and the child would be born as a blessing for the new couple. It was strange to hear this practical man speak of the impossibilities they both knew. And although he knew all that, he was also aware of how these dreams sometimes helped restore health. He brought her water and gave it to her to drink in small sips. Aurora only came in once to bring warm milk. She didn't ask what substance she put in Altea's food, but Altea was immediately overcome by a deep sleep. After seven in the evening, when the light coming from the patio was so dim that the room was nothing more than a sad and desolate gloom pregnant with silence, he smelled the aroma of the stew wafting from the kitchen. I had an overwhelming urge to go there and keep Aurora company while she cooked, to chat with her sitting in a chair by the table, with a glass of wine and slices of cheese, watching her back as she cooked. Even if she didn't answer him, it was enough for him to know he was there, listening. "What an absurd and weak man I am!" he thought as he left the room. He wasn't a man who found happiness in sick women, neither Natacha nor Altea. Aurora Valverde possessed all the mystery of malicious women, but her spirit was vibrant, and where that vitality came from wasn't important. If it came from the devil, and he laughed at himself, perhaps it would be better to spend eternity in hell than in heaven, where bliss must be far too dull.

He went into the kitchen and she looked at him.

- Where would you like to have dinner? The table in the living room is bigger.

-But there are two of us…

The dog was sitting by the clay oven, watching them and waiting for a piece of meat to fall in.

-It's fine here, and it's warmer.

He sat down, just as he had planned, slightly away from the table, crossing his legs, and resting one elbow on it. He watched her move left or right, bend down or stand on her tiptoes to reach for something.

Can I help you?

"No need, everything's ready, it just needs to be cooked. Can I get you something?" He didn't wait for a reply; the board, the country cheese, and the glass of wine were already beside him. He broke off a piece of bread and put it in his mouth.

- Do you cook everything yourself?

-Of course, I try to avoid going to the village.
- And she never got married?
- Do you realize that you're asking stupid questions for an educated man like yourself, a ship's captain, no less, who should be more practical?
Mendoza felt offended, even though she was right. He disliked those pedantic replies. He kept quiet and took a sip from his glass.
She was leaning against the counter, stirring the pot, and since everything was fine, she started setting the table. She didn't look at him, nor he at her. His arm passed very close to her face; she could almost smell the faint scent of his armpits, an aroma of clothes worn during the day, but with a hint of musk or anise.
- Do you think the boy's problem can be solved when she gets better?
"It depends on when that happened. If several weeks have passed, it would be complicated, and I wouldn't recommend it. Also... the muscle spasm I mentioned isn't just in the arms and legs, but also in the uterine muscles. Excessive contraction could have harmed the baby, caused it to detach, or even suffocated the embryo. I've seen cases where the embryo has become encapsulated within the muscle and developed into a tumor."
- So the child can die on his own?
-Perhaps, or being born sick.
Maximo thought, as he gave the dog a piece of cheese and stroked its head.
"Look, let's not spoil the dinner. Everything I explained has already been done, and all that remains is to see how things develop. There are no cures, Captain, only remedies that ease life a little."
He served the hot vegetables into two deep plates with a large ladle. He chopped the meat as if he were dissecting an anatomical specimen, his face intensely focused and his shoulders tense. When he finished, he placed a piece on his plate and a smaller one on his own.
The stew was delicious, and he couldn't remember how long it had been since he'd eaten anything like it.
- And who taught him everything he knows?
My mother was self-taught; she read and practiced all the sciences, even though it wasn't allowed for her because she was a woman. She would go to the cemetery to practice dissections in the ossuary building. At home, she made chemical mixtures. She built physics equipment. She understood

algebra and music. She came from a Portuguese family related to one from Italy. There was a famous anatomist in her family named Amusco.
"I understand," he said. "Perhaps his father was too conservative and narrow-minded..."
"He was blind, Captain. He had perfectly healthy eyes, but he was blinder than a bat."
They ate, him trying to avoid her curiosity, but he couldn't stop watching her: the way her fingers gripped the cutlery, the movements of her forearms and elbows, her shoulders. The way stray strands of hair fell across her face and she brushed them aside. Ways of acting free from convention.
When they finished, he praised the dinner once more, and she thanked him for the compliment by taking his hand after putting the plates on the counter.
-Come on, Captain. I'll show you my parents' library.
They went out into the courtyard and, after passing through the doors of the rooms they already knew, entered through another double door, made of wrought iron and stained glass with rhomboid figures. The room was large, with a desk in the center and the walls lined with bookshelves.
This is where both my mother and father would spend their days after work, when they got along, of course. He would sit at his desk with his accounting books. My mother would sit on the sofa to the left, sometimes with more than one book at a time, reading one and looking up information in others, and sometimes writing. When he went to bed, he would turn off the desk light and kiss me goodnight. For her, it was a release. I would get out of bed and go spy on her. I would watch her get up and go to the bookcase, searching book by book, obsessed with finding a piece of information she was missing and couldn't leave for the next day. She would only use the desk then, because my father didn't like finding his things moved. Sometimes she would talk or gesture to herself, preoccupied with her science topics. Most of the time she went to bed at three or four in the morning. She would tidy the desk exactly as my father had left it and turn off the lights. I must confess that she caught me spying on her many times, because I would fall asleep in the library doorway. And when I was older, she would come and get me from my bed and take me with her, very

quietly, so my father wouldn't find out. That's how I learned everything she knew, and I still read at night. Practicing…
Mendoza surveyed the shelves, trying to decipher the worn spines. Literature, philosophy, history, algebra, theology, astronomy, medicine, geography, zoology, botany—the shelves continued to the ceiling and from wall to wall. On the desk lay several stacks of accounting books.
"This was my father's library," she said, resting her hands on two stacks of books that had never been opened since the murder. "The rest belonged to my mother's family, and to her, of course."
- And don't you have...a laboratory, or something like that?
Aurora Valverde stared at him with furious eyes.
"I'm convinced now. You're more than stupid, you're an imbecile. I wouldn't be surprised if you suffer from some kind of mental retardation resulting from a childhood illness, or something that happened during your gestation. You can't seem to shake what you've heard from my family since you were a boy: that my mother was a witch, that she collaborated with the devil, that she killed children and preserved them in jars of formaldehyde all along the hallways of the house, that she ran an abortion business with another witch like Blanca Valente, and who knows what else. Do you want to see the broom I use to fly? Or the boiling pot where I put live children? You've already seen the kitchen and you didn't say a word to me then. You waited until you saw this library to reach conclusions that are precisely the opposite of all the logic and reasoning that all these books try to clarify. When women are in the kitchen, everything is fine with you, but in a library, a woman is something strange; a woman can only think sentimentally." A woman who thinks is a monster with hidden laboratories in her basement—a woman like that isn't a woman at all, but rather possesses the traits of a man. Only in this way can one explain her question, the captain of an old ship that has passed through the hands of two notorious assassins.
Then Máximo Mendoza, more irritated than offended, confused and nervous, could only manage to grab Aurora Valverde by the wrists, and while she resisted, he began to kiss her. His lips traced the entire contour of her body, then her neck, then her chest, always holding her arms, until he felt her hands go still. And when he looked into her eyes, she was crying, and her body began to tremble, speaking in another language, one

unknown to him. And then Aurora's arms encircled his shoulders, clinging to him like a frightened animal. He kissed her mouth, inhaling the scent of musk. Sharp at times, always captivating. They lay down on the armchair where her mother studied. He on top of her, kissing her, adoring her. She beneath the body of the man who resembled her father, strong-bodied and graceful, with curly hair and a dark beard. She imagined that beneath the old white shirt she might touch the hair on his chest. And he knew that under Aurora's dress were breasts perhaps never touched by any man, never seen, two green apples, or two peaches whose pulp would mix with his saliva.

They took off their clothes and sought out each other's bodies. Clinging together like two viscous substances that needed no oil to slide over and around one another. Penetrating each other's orifices with their tongues, licking the folds, sliding through the bodies' crevices, clinging to each other's limbs. The armchair was no longer enough, and they fell to the floor, onto the rug woven by the Indians, and believed they were rolling in virgin grass under the shade of the trees, the trees they now understood because they had been killed to uphold the ideas of the world.

Later, when the thought returned to linger, he was sitting on the floor, his back against the edge of the armchair, his arms stretched out on the seat, his legs outstretched, naked. She was still lying on the rug, on her side, almost in the fetal position, except that her head, eyes open, rested on one arm, and the other arm was folded across her chest. She gazed at the man's nakedness.

“Actually, she never told me why she killed him. Such an irrational act in such an intelligent woman,” she said, rising, first leaning on the rug, then resting her hands on the floor, looking around, as if lost in thought. “This library is like a brain; it contains all the history and ideas of the world. But if the books aren’t opened, they’re dead. The human brain is a graveyard…”

-I think I've read it before...

"Perhaps, ideas are never new. It is oblivion that saves us from suicide..."

And he approached Maximus, resting his head on his legs, caressing the dark hair, and contemplating the human organ with which men dominated the world. He took it in his hand, and said: "This is stronger than the very idea of God."

-Everything dies, Aurora…
-But God died long before your body died.

*

She didn't know what day it was or where she was. All the time before, she had been wandering in a limbo, possessed by a fever that dragged her from dream to dream: images of the rain-swept countryside, the sound of thunder, flashes of lightning, the fire that surrounded her, galloping horses, chilling screams of men and women, cries that reached the overcast sky. After a long pause of deep sleep, she heard conversations around her: a man and a woman, the clinking of dishes, doors closing, lights flickering from the window that someone was opening.
Her eyes ached. She looked at her hands; they were as thin as the talons of some carrion bird. She was so hungry that she began to rummage through the sheets as if she were digging. A graceful, white hand with manicured nails stopped her.
-Don't worry, my lady, now that you've finally woken up you must be craving something solid.
Altea looked up. A woman was speaking to her slowly, as if she were a little girl who didn't understand anything. She knew everything; now, suddenly, she understood everything she had been through. The bat bites and the fever. She also remembered that she had almost died burned alive in the cart. She touched her face; it still stung, but her skin felt damaged or deformed.
"Don't worry, her body hasn't been burned, thank your dog," she said, pointing to the side of the bed where Max was sitting, staring at Altea with eyes eager for affection.
For now, she felt no desire to move, much less to get up. Her arms felt as heavy as tree trunks, yet they were loose and very weak. She wiggled her toes, barely able to feel them. Her expression transformed into one of the faces of panic. Then Captain Mendoza came to embrace her, sitting beside her on the bed, rocking her and whispering affectionate things she had

never asked for. She didn't even understand them, because the sounds seemed muffled or filtered through a layer of cotton.
"What's wrong with me?" she said, tearfully despite herself, touching the parts of her body that didn't respond, as if they weren't hers: her legs, her ears, her face.
Aurora Valverde now knew who that woman was. She had hoped it was a fat, ugly old woman. The woman was patting her shoulder stupidly, making the sound one uses to comfort a crying baby. And she also realized the witch's true nature in that whispering that said nothing yet revealed everything: a blatant lie beneath the miserable surface reality. The warmth of Máximo Mendoza's body warmed her left side, but on the right, the witch's cold hand darkened her spirits. And yet, the warmth increased her fever and her illness, while the cold lessened and eased it.
When Máximo stepped back, still holding her hand, she saw that his eyes were teary. He was a mere shadow of the military man she had known. He was thin and pale, his naturally curly hair untidy, very long, and dark. Altea stroked his cheek, and he rested his face in her hand.
"What's happened to us, my love?" he said.
Altea looked at Aurora, saw the jealousy etched on the witch's face, and then the sarcasm when he looked at her, with guilt.
From then on, every afternoon, Altea observed the routine rituals dedicated to her care: Aurora's entrance with the milk tea, Máximo rising from the chair where he had napd to tend to her, and immediately the intelligent glances exchanged between them, the brush of their fingers as she passed him the tray, the touch of their shoulders as they crossed paths so she could take his pulse at his wrist, and he the other to caress her other hand. They both touched her, but their eyes met each other, yearning. It was clear that Captain Mendoza's love, if it had ever been love at all, had transformed into a kind of guilty affection, a guilt that festered before the disapproving eyes of his new lover.
“How can she not see the witch’s mean face?” Altea thought. “She looks at her as if she were a small-time seamstress from Cádiz, resigned to heartbreak and betrayal.”
But women were experts at generating guilt, she knew that very well. And men, stupid animals, circled around like mangy dogs waiting for a dry bone that still held a trace of the old, longed-for love.

Since she had irrevocably taken the man away from her, one afternoon she told the witch to stay in the room.
-Sit next to me, Aurora.
She brought closer the rocking chair where Máximo lay during his nap.
- Where is he?
-He went shopping, and I think he's looking for a new cart.
-You've tamed the captain.
- Do you think it's necessary? Some others have done it before, but men want to pretend they're independent, and you grant them that from time to time.
-Like loosening the reins and then pulling suddenly.
-That's right, but you shouldn't pull too hard, otherwise you risk them rearing up and running away, like a horse dragging the very fire that burns it.
They looked at each other, and both looks were cold. Altea saw the fire and the barren branches of her passage through a desolate strait between high rocks. Aurora gazed at the icebergs and the arid skies where the days are mothers who give birth to no nights.
- Do you know why we've come?
"I already told the captain that I couldn't do anything for you in your current state. I still can't do anything without killing you."
-But a simple operation...
"The infection the bats gave her, my lady, causes spasms in every muscle in her body. Her uterus has suffered, and I wouldn't be surprised if it were now a kind of rigid, impossible-to-open hide. The child has undoubtedly suffered..."
- Is it a boy...? How so...?
"It is, I knew it the moment I saw her lying in the street, almost burned, almost dead. The child was talking to me, and I heard him clearly amidst all those foolish people in the town. She has suffered, and you must accept that."
- Accept what?
-To him, however it may be.
-But it feels like a curse...

"Then accept it as it is. Don't adore it, hate it if you wish. Don't cherish it, abhor it if that makes you feel better. Take his life as a transformation of yours, adapt to suffering and pain as if it were the longed-for maternal happiness of fools."
Altea was no longer watching her, she was only touching her belly under her nightgown.
“There’s an old legend,” Aurora said, “that someone will surely write down someday. A man was walking along and came across a vagabond cooking something over a small fire. As night was falling and he was hungry, the man stopped beside the vagabond and asked, ‘What are you cooking, friend?’ The vagabond answered without getting up or looking at him, still stoking the fire with a stick. ‘It’s my heart.’ The man couldn’t help but laugh; obviously, he was either crazy or drunk. ‘And what does it taste like, if I may ask?’ he inquired, half-jokingly, half-seriously. ‘It’s bitter,’ said the vagabond, ‘but it’s my heart.’”

During the following week, she gradually regained strength in her legs. She would get up with Máximo's help, but Aurora was always there, urging her to walk on her own. Then Altea abruptly pulled away from him and stood there, her nightgown hanging loose and her hair loose, pale as dried ears of wheat. She looked at herself in the mirror directly in front of her; Aurora had placed it there intentionally, because after encouraging her to walk, she had suddenly stepped back, and the sight of her convalescence saddened her. How could she possibly compete with the witch's beauty? But she didn't cry. She accomplished what she had set out to do: stand without assistance.
The following days she would get up, and after washing and dressing in a dress of Aurora's that looked ridiculous on her, she would sit down to breakfast in the courtyard. She would stay there almost all day, listening to the strange birds that the witch kept in cages.
"What strange birds!" he said once, while having a snack of mate cocido and fried cakes.
"They were gifts for my mother from explorer friends. Baumgarten, for example, brought her that parrot over there in the biggest cage, fifteen years ago. I was just a little girl, and I fell in love with it the moment I saw those colors. When it gets angry, it opens its wings and the feathers on its

neck stand up, and then it looks like a demon on fire. It has all the colors of hell hidden under its wings."
- Can I touch it?
-I don't advise it. Just trust me.
-I don't doubt it, Aurora.
-If you'll excuse me, ma'am, I have visitors.
She got up and went down the hall toward the front door. Altea overheard a conversation she didn't understand, and soon the witch arrived accompanied by a woman who seemed familiar. She was a woman of high society, with a hat and veil that almost completely obscured her face. But the familiarity lay in the voice she had heard, or rather, in the tone and manner of speaking. She realized the woman had seen her and gave her a frightened look, judging by the abrupt way she tried to hide. Aurora and the other woman whispered something for a few seconds and went into one of the rooms. She had witnessed scenes like this all week, at different times of the morning or afternoon. Even the night before, around ten o'clock, she had heard the doorbell, the unmistakable footsteps of two women in the hall, and the closing of Aurora's bedroom door. Aurora hadn't asked her anything, but the witch would come in immediately afterward to see her, using the excuse of asking if she needed anything. Her expression betrayed her anxiety to uncover the signs of suffering in Altea's soul. With a simple, polite question, she painstakingly rubbed in her face that all those women left the house having obtained what they sought. There were no jars of formaldehyde in the hallways, no pools of corpses, not even the smell of blood, not the slightest stain on the witch's immaculate dresses. All of them, except her, left satisfied. She alone would leave with the child unharmed, just as she had entered that house. With the curse upon her shoulders, condemned to accept it as one accepts that it comes from God himself. Yes, after all, she was beginning to understand Manuel and all those sleepless, cruel priests who had taught him to be what he was: the inverted copy of his brother.
When it was already seven in the evening and dusk was falling, she saw them leave the room. Aurora was helping the woman walk, who was whimpering a little, but now without the veil covering her. Then their eyes met again, this time unintentionally, and they recognized each other. It was Lucrecia, Captain Mendoza's cousin, happily married to a close relative of

General Urquiza. She heard them say goodbye at the door, and then the clatter of a carriage driving away along the cobblestones.
When Aurora returned, her footsteps sounded proudly on the old colonial bricks.
- And how is the sick girl feeling? Does she need anything before dinner?
Altea made the most intense and greatest gesture of contempt she was capable of.
"How does he do it?" he asked. "Spells, magic words, or what?"
"If you truly wish to know... none of that. Only medicine, my lady. Weren't shamans always the healers of ancient peoples? My library is at your disposal, Altea. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll go and prepare dinner."
Dodging Aurora's irony as best she could, Altea slowly rose and walked to her bedroom. She wouldn't eat anything that night; she would simply lie down, trying not to hear the moans from the other room after Máximo kissed her goodbye. She would swallow her anger, which, more bitter than her own heart, tasted of the rottenness of all the abortions that had taken place in that house. Where were they? Between what walls, under what floors were they hiding? If the anger she felt had been enough to create the ferment that would kill her child, she would have been one of the happy visitors who left satisfied. But something told her it wasn't anger that was killing them, but rather the absolute and most blatant indifference.

At the end of that week in January, it began to get very hot. The house had a water pump in the kitchen and another in the backyard. The water started to run low on Friday, and by Saturday morning there was nothing left in either well. Only the rainwater collected in the large, empty flowerpots.
"What do you do in these cases, Aurora?" Máximo asked her, when the three of them were in the kitchen.
-I just hope. No drought can last long enough to kill me.
-But we need water, I'll go to the stream that's nearby.
Two hours later, he had returned.
"It's dry, and everyone in the village is in the same boat. What if we try the cistern? They used to dig really deep wells."
"It's sealed off, Captain. When my father installed the pumps, they disabled that well. It's filled with earth and stones."

Altea and Máximo knew they could leave in a few days, so they decided to stay and enjoy the priceless coolness the colonial house offered. But one afternoon, Max returned from his usual stroll through the village, his tongue hanging out. He was thirsty and lay down at Altea's feet in the patio. Suddenly, he looked up, catching a whiff of something. He ran to the cistern and started jumping, trying to reach the edge.

"Looks like a dog's instinct doesn't fail. There's water there, Aurora," Mendoza said. But she stood up and stopped him by the arm. Altea noticed the worry on the witch's face.

"There's nothing to lose by trying," he said.

He walked to the cistern and tried to lift the lid. It was a heavy slab, fitted precisely to the edges. He went to the shed where some tools were kept and returned with a shovel and a pickaxe. He painstakingly opened a channel in the circumference between the old cistern wall and the slab that covered it. The women watched him work, seated at the table, exchanging knowing glances. When the captain finally managed to insert the edge of the pickaxe into the crack, he climbed onto the edge of the cistern and began to push. They stood up, curious; the dog jumped for joy, but nervously, worried. Altea could almost read, in Max's movements, more than thirst, a savage anxiety.

As the entire circle cracked, the slab slowly rose. Dry mud and earthworms were the first things they saw. It was too heavy to move all at once, so Máximo slowly pushed it, and then, suddenly, it stopped.

"What's wrong?" Altea asked, but no answer was needed. Max jumped onto the edge and began barking desperately into the dark depths of the well. His bark turned into a deep, mournful howl. The sound of the water could also be heard.

"At least there's water," Aurora said, her hands folded on her lap, having sat down again. She wore a mischievous smile, the kind that simply waits for events to unfold.

But it was the smell that had made Mendoza stop, the smell emanating from the bottom of the old well. The water flowed through ancient tunnels dug by the Indians, perhaps under the orders of some Spanish chieftain from the 16th or 17th century. The water ran smoothly, striking hard objects against the walls, their sound like the percussion of primitive music played on instruments crafted by the Indians. Perhaps wood, though he

couldn't see anything, perhaps bones. And the smell was now unmistakable.
The smell of death.
That was the laboratory she had been waiting to see. And thinking of the perfume Aurora wore at night when they were together, she threw the shovel to the ground, grabbed the dog, and led it outside. The women watched her do this, seemingly astonished, but Altea already knew what it was all about. They heard the dog barking, tied to a wheel of the cart. Then Máximo returned to the yard, took Altea by the arm, and led her to his bedroom. Aurora guessed what they were saying: “Shall we go now?” she would ask, adding, “I want to go back to my husband.” And he, accepting his final fate: “We’re going.”
She saw them leave, still in the clothes they were wearing: she in the dress Aurora had given her, and he in his father's suit. They looked like two costumed dolls emerging arm in arm, stiff as puppets the witch could no longer control because they were leaving the house. And as darkness fell, they entered the hallway and walked through it to the door, while the echo in the entryway repeated Aurora Valverde's laughter, enveloped in the deep vapor of the dead.

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Máximo Mendoza kept thinking that the silence was painful, but he clung to it desperately, anything to avoid looking at the woman beside him. He saw her pleated skirt, an unsuitable dress for the journey back to the river. A dirty white one that Aurora Valverde had given him as if it were a handout. But Altea wore it with disdainful pride, her face as cold as ice. If only he could look her in the face for even a moment, and break through that glacial contempt—for it wasn't hatred—that at least would have been understandable, and therefore a consolation for Mendoza's unease. Instead, there was complete indifference, as if the one driving the cart were nothing more than one of those automatons he'd read about once. Ones that played chess and always won, intelligent machines that in this case served as pawns, driving a cart, nothing more. What interest could

such a beautiful woman possibly have in a mere object of use? That's what he was, a man for the use of three women: Natacha, Altea, and Aurora. Was he a victim? Not even that. He had succumbed to his own weakness. A ship's captain never truly commands the waters; he merely sails across them, forgetting them. Such was the plan he pondered as his eyes remained fixed on the reins, the horse's back, and the pleated skirt, while the silence of every human voice was like acid on a wound, painful yet fitting for wallowing in his own misery.

Suddenly, the voice came out without him planning it. Something inside him betrayed his omnipotent pride.

"We'll stop by my godfather's place, I promised," he said, explaining, always justifying his actions under the impassive and watchful gaze of that icy woman. Because after the summer in his heart, winter had returned.

She said nothing. Her voice had grown somewhat hoarse after her illness, and when she spoke, an ochre tone lingered in the quality of her sound, almost as if autumn were etched in her breath. He would have liked to see those rusty leaves emerge from her mouth like a tempestuous wind. Autumn was bleak, but he preferred it to the horror of winter. In one, there was still the ochre light of hope; in the other, death approached with utter darkness.

The winding road was warm this time; no rain, no wind, no cold, only the clouds that covered the summer sun at just the right moment to protect them. Then he dared to look at her, as night fell and they approached Lavalle. She was looking at the sky, and she prepared to speak.

-It seems that heaven is kind to us, isn't it?

Did she want him to answer? Did she hate him so much that she needed to humiliate him by avoiding the real conversation she was hoping for? Was the truth in sincerity or in the elusive lie?

"We haven't been good to God, it seems to me," she continued.

Maximo remembered the cross in the room of the colonial mansion, the night he was bathing. Christ was the messenger of humankind, the man who understands humankind: he attacks it, betrays it, condemns it, and forgives it. God the Father was a beatific symbol, the gift of heaven, the sunlight, the green of the fields. What an undertaking the heavens had been, what a great empire so effectively built!

They spent the night in Lavalle, at Fermín Valente's house. When the old man saw him, he said a few words in Catalan that neither of them bothered to translate, nor did he try when he saw their gaunt faces.
"Are the boys here?" asked Máximo as he helped Altea down the stairs.
No. They went fishing over the weekend. They're coming back tomorrow.
It was for the best. Old Dorotea offered her the same room where Altea had slept. No one asked anything, just as when the silence is in keeping with the time of year, that is, nightfall, the open countryside, people returning home, doors closing, lights going out, the slow hoot of an owl, and the strange wind rustling through the leaves.
In the morning, Valente tried to offer them money to buy clothes and food, but it was Mendoza who signed a document as payment for the horse and sulky they had taken. Despite his protests, he left the paper on the shop counter and left around the corner under the sign of Fermín Valente's thriving business. As they walked away, he looked back and saw the boys arriving at a brisk trot, shouting and excited. They certainly wouldn't have been able to catch a few more wretches from the countryside, adding them to the bag of their businesses.
The road leading to Colonel Las Heras's ranch branched off from the one they had taken from the port. He could already smell the river and thought about his boat. What would they think of him after so many days away? Natacha would scold him more than ever, but he didn't care anymore. He would listen to her as always, sheltering himself in his own shell of indifference and resentment.
The morning had grown cloudy, and the trees lining the road looked heavy, not a single leaf stirring. They walked slowly, glancing to either side, as if hoping to find among the timeless trees—for their absolute stillness granted them timelessness—the man and woman they had been almost two weeks before.
They reached the gate, its opening so broken it swayed in a breeze no one felt. A sound of cracking wood echoed through the dust. They continued on toward the main house of the ranch. Altea gazed at the beautiful architecture of the spacious house, its two stories dominating the countryside. A remnant of the good old days. Around it, nothing remained. Only bushes withering from neglect, a flower garden that was now gone. A

pack of dogs came out to greet them, and Max stood stiff and alert in the back of the cart.
They stopped, and getting out, Máximo shouted:
"Get out, dogs!" she yelled as she climbed down the stairs, threatening them by striking the ground with her riding crop. Most of them scurried away; only a couple remained close, watchful, as their godmother left the house, shading her face with her hand.
"The boy Máximo!" she said, her voice catching in her throat as she stumbled to hug him. Altea watched from the cart, smiling.
"But what has happened to my boy, he's so thin, for goodness sake!" she lamented, still holding him by the shoulders and looking him up and down.
-Nothing important, aunt, just setbacks we're used to, aren't they?
-And you're asking me? Didn't you know?
- About what?
The old woman was now whimpering, glancing sideways at the cart; she was ashamed to be seen like this.
"Let's go inside the house, Máximo," Altea said.
But the old woman got nervous and refused.
"But Aunt Eustaquia, calm down. If you don't tell me..."
The old woman kept whimpering as she watched Altea approach, noticing how haggard she looked. She touched her face when they greeted each other, and it was as if she knew what was wrong.
-Poor thing, I misjudged you when I first saw you...
-Okay, don't worry. Let's go into the shade.
"But it's cloudy..." said the old woman, denying them entry. But she couldn't bear it any longer and took refuge in Máximo's arms.
-It's all empty, I have nothing. I sleep on a straw mattress in the middle of the living room, right where the rug used to be where you slept as a child, that really plush one, that still had the smell of the lamb, that's what you used to say, remember?
-How could I forget...
"We sold everything, my dear, and then... he left me. He lay in bed for many days, and didn't want to get up. I was angry, I deliberately hurt his pride, can you believe it? The man I had loved for forty-five years."
- How was it?
-He let himself die, the debts, who knows...

-But I cancelled the debt with Antonio Valente the day after I met you on the road.
Aunt Eustaquia looked him in the eyes and smiled.
"He died the day before that boy arrived. And since everything was in Gregorio's name, he told me to sell him the ranch to pay off the debt, and I didn't know anything about it. I found out later from the ranch hands, but it was too late. What was I supposed to do, just an old woman all alone? He let me stay and live here..."
Now a strong wind had indeed risen. Altea stroked the old woman's back, adjusting her wool shawl, while Máximo embraced her, letting her weep, imagining the colonel's death in bed—he, who no longer had a horse or a ranch, the old strongman whose boots were already worn, the very symbol of imminent death. He saw himself in that bed; that's how all the old bastions of power ended. The dead one has killed strike back, they help each other, they come together no matter how long ago they died. It's not a strategy or revenge, it's a debt owed, and honor, always threatened with extinction, needs to assert its demands.
Should he go and confront the Valentes? Should he face them, even challenge Antonio to a street fight? Thinking of the boy's boastful face, seconded by that brute Lorenzo, he felt overcome with a profound weariness. He had become a coward out of exhaustion. In fifteen days, his personality had crumbled. But what was that personality anyway? Captain Máximo Mendoza y Hurtado was a fictional character of noble lineage.
They left the ranch without entering the house. To do so would have offended the ash-strewn remnants of the Las Heras couple's pride. Behind them lay the ranch with its empty rooms, perhaps soon to be demolished, for old Eustaquia would soon follow her husband's path. They left in silence, both heads bowed, heading for the port, still several kilometers away. They would arrive in the afternoon, perhaps shortly before nightfall. They knew they were defeated, and the overcast sky was a gloomy shroud of weariness. One sighed, and the other immediately afterward. And then, they both smiled simultaneously. Even irony, a sweet irony, had a place between them, in the cramped space on the driver's seat. With a dog licking their faces to lift their spirits. Max had settled in as best he could, his long, pointed bones making them laugh softly, with a shyness befitting two teenagers. They glanced at each other over the dog's head. He held the

reins with tense hands, she with her hands clasped like a rock on her skirt. United by the wind that stirred their hair and carried the scent of the river. And when they saw the ship, enormous, beautifully black in the falling night, they saw the dark sails and the mourning crepe adorning the masts. The cart stopped, and the people recognized the captain. Many greeted him respectfully and silently, but they looked at him with a sense of unease. What has happened? thought Máximo, as he got down from the cart and helped Altea. They walked toward the dock, but before they arrived, people surrounded him and looked at him anxiously. He asked what had happened, and when they didn't answer, he shook a few men roughly by the arms. They let him, because they had known him for a long time, and they liked him. One said:

"They've been looking for you for a long time, Captain. Where have you been?" But everyone already knew the answer when they saw Altea. They all knew of his weakness, knowing his wife, and they protected him.

"Come with me to the dock, captain," he said afterward.

Mendoza and Altea followed him.

Perhaps the lady shouldn't…

Maximus saw the apprehension on the man's face, gently grabbed Altea by the elbow, asking her to stay.

I'm not going to stay here and have everyone look at me like I'm some kind of freak. If something happens that I need to know about, it's better to know now…

They shrugged and continued on their way to the dock. There was a small shack that served as a shed where they kept junk and tools. They went inside, and the caretaker turned on some lamps. It was daytime, but there were no windows. Against one wall stood a coffin, and another one right in the center. There was a smell of decay and confinement. Altea covered her nose.

-They were brought here about ten days ago, but we didn't dare bury them without a proper funeral and without their consent, Captain.

Mendoza approached with a lamp in his hand and read what was written on the cover of each book in large, charcoal letters. One said Ariel, the other Manuel. Then he stepped in front of Altea, but she had already read it.

"But I don't understand, I don't understand anything..." she began to stammer. The smell no longer mattered.

Mendoza tried to get her to leave, but Altea broke free and went to Manuel's coffin. She rested her elbows and her head in her hands. She wasn't crying much yet; she just seemed intent on thinking, as if that were how she could understand what she was seeing.
Mendoza placed a hand on his shoulder, but his gaze was fixed on Ariel's letters.
The boy was brought ashore by the tide after several days. He fell overboard and was attacked by caimans. Everyone on the dock saw what happened that morning. We gathered the remains, Captain, and put them in that box.
- What do you mean he fell off the ship?!
The man bowed his head and shrugged. Stuttering, he said:
Mrs. Natacha will explain it to you…
Yes, he knew that very well.
"And what happened to my husband?" Altea asked.
But Maximus didn't listen to the reply. He went outside and took a deep breath. An intense dizziness forced him to lean against a wall. He felt nauseous, but he didn't want to vomit in front of all those people who knew and respected him, because he saw pity in them, and that was the last thing he wanted to provoke in others. Suddenly, he wanted everyone to feel his anger. In reality, his hatred—that's what he felt now, without remorse or compassion for anyone.
He walked to the end of the pier and gazed at his ship anchored almost in the middle of the wide river. And then he saw Natacha looking toward the shore, her hands resting like claws on the deck railing, perhaps waiting for him like that for many days. She was a statue dressed in black, petrified grief. Just another figure, sculpted on that immense coffin that was now the “Juan Manuel de Rosas,” his ship, his home, and his destiny.

WOMEN WHO DECIDE THE SENTENCES

5

The morning shone with a light she rarely saw in summer, a reflection so intense of dawn on the river's waters that she had to cover her eyes as soon as she stepped onto the deck. She had gotten up late; José's movements hadn't let her sleep peacefully. She had stroked his head and chest until he finally fell asleep, but she remained awake, as if watching over him. That wasn't the right word, of course, but somehow watching that man sleep was like watching him dead. He had spoken to her about his brother, very little, but she had guessed enough to realize that José never stopped thinking about him, even in his sleep, and suddenly the image came to her that when one of them was awake, the other slept, or perhaps even died temporarily.

His head hurt, he took the bottle out from under the bed, drank the last sip of liquor, went outside and threw it into the river.

"Old man!" she cried, searching for him on the white surface of the deck. She saw flashes of light on the wood and in the air, and a torrent of light fell from the sky, blinding her.

"Damn it..." she muttered, annoyed that the still-sleeping man had changed his ways to the point of disorienting her and making her feel ill at ease with the boat and the river, the only things she possessed. The only thing he hadn't taken from her was her thirst for drink, but even the taste of the liquor now seemed meager to her.

He found the old man lying on the floor. He kicked him to wake him up, and the other man stirred, grunting and protesting.

"What's with all the fuss, old man! You know we have to leave today! Come on, get up already!" He continued kicking him until the old man slowly got up and walked towards the kitchen.

- Where are you going?

-Let's make some mate...

Go fix the engine if you didn't do it yesterday...

The old man stared at the water, perhaps thinking of the son she had killed, but his eyes were expressionless, clouded by sleep and alcohol. He scratched his chest, then his head, and began to urinate over the gunwale. Afterward, he walked to the bow, lifted the hatch covering the machinery, and descended the ladder below deck.

Mara went in to wake José, but found him sitting on the bed, watching her.

- What are you looking at?

-Nothing, I wasn't looking at you, I was looking at the light.
She turned around and her eyes hurt again.
-You're crazy, you must have dreamt about the devil last night, judging by how you moved.
She filled a kettle with water and placed it on the stove. She took yerba mate from the cabinet under the sink and filled the mate gourd, inserted the bombilla (metal straw), and leaned against the table to wait.
- What's wrong? Why are you so quiet? Do you miss that Indian guy?
Nothing's wrong with me, and no, I don't miss him. I'm just wondering what we're going to do.
-I'm still doing my own thing, I've already wasted enough time these past few days.
José stood up and pressed his body against hers. She sat down at the table to get a little distance away.
-I left, we have to leave before noon, upriver, the old man is repairing the machine, if he's not sleeping off his hangover.
Then they heard the engine start, loud and clear. Mara prepared the mate and they sat outside, in the shade of the eaves. It was ten in the morning, and from the trees came the sound of flocks rustling the branches and suddenly flying across the river above them. They watched them happily, and the fear from that night was no longer visible in José's eyes. The old man stuck his head out of the deck hatch, a smile of satisfaction spreading across his face.
"Just look at the old man! He finally turned out to be an engineer," said José.
Mara started laughing and rested her head on his shoulder.
- Come here, old man, and have some mate, you deserve it!
The man finished climbing and approached them, standing with his torso bare, because it was already very hot. As he sipped from the straw, he gazed at the water.
"Don't you have a name? It's always 'old man this,' 'old man that'..." asked José.
Mara and the other man looked at each other, and she said:
-He's nobody to have a name...
- And the son?
- Which one? Do you have a son, old man? I don't see anyone else.

José tried to find some sign of sarcasm in Mara's face. Then she laughed, but he kept looking at her. He no longer understood her, because she suddenly seemed to have regained a certain self-control that he hadn't noticed until that moment. Before, she had been a tough woman, but lost in the maze of rivers and streams of that jungle, which was like a reflection of her life. Now she continued with the same apparent demeanor as always, but there was something she was hiding. It wasn't about the past or everything she had told him; anyone could have suffered those things without considering themselves special. He hadn't believed half of her story about Spain and the supposed incest, and even less the episode with the old women she called witches. Staring at her, her expression was the same as always, brusque and angry most of the time, but this morning there was something in her eyes that reminded him of Altea: the almost icy expression of his sister-in-law who did not seem capable of feeling any kind of passion, not even that of the body, because he was sure that she had not felt it the night of the rites in the village of Toba.
He turned his head, looking this time at the river, upstream, and thought about the boat his brother was on.
- Where are we going?
-I already told you yesterday, we have to find Valverde a few miles away...
-I remember, a certain Amusco, right? Portuguese?
-Just Brazilian.
- And what business does this bring us?
Mara laughed again.
"The gentleman thinks he's a partner now," she said, speaking to the old man. "But I'm the one in charge here, so I'm the one who shares the profits."
-As you wish, ma'am. And what's the deal?
"You're stupider than I thought, or your brain is somewhere else..." He approached José and sat on his lap.
The old man looked at them for a while and then walked to the bow. While they were inside, he felt the jolts of the mattress, and once the boat was underway, he turned the wheel two or three times. He heard Mara's insults and José's laughter. The old man was laughing too.

It was past noon when she smelled the aroma of the fish she was preparing. She went outside to call him and gave him a couple of affectionate taps on the head.

-Just keep having fun, old man.

"Leave him alone, Mara, don't bother him anymore..." said José, and helped the old man sit down with them at the table.

The day was far too hot. The sun had never fully emerged from behind the morning clouds, and a silvery haze lingered in the air, distorting the light until it became the cause and source of the weariness of that beginning of the afternoon.

After lunch, Mara went outside and leaned against the railing, watching the shoreline, which was slowly becoming more overgrown, with almost no beaches left. The journey was peaceful, but winding, and she couldn't let the old man get distracted or fall asleep. She knew the riverbed was deep; she had traveled it too many times, but you could never be sure. Sometimes the river carried logs or sandbars after a storm. She knew one was coming that afternoon or evening at the latest, and that's why she had tried to get them out as soon as possible to take shelter in some bend protected by the trees. From inside, she could hear José snoring. She wondered to what extent she could entrust him with her business. She wasn't willing to give anything away, but he had managed to get her to give in almost without realizing it—first her body, then her trust, and what else was left for her to do? Perhaps José followed the same path as Santiago, and in this way she felt safer.

It was three in the afternoon. The glare that had stung her eyes that morning transformed into an iridescent opacity that dimmed its brilliance to the north. Far in the same direction, the sky was as dark as nightfall. The waters remained as calm as a sheet of rapidly cooling lava. She dropped the bottle she had taken from the kitchen, and its sound as it hit the water was like glass shattering on iron. The river seemed motionless, and Mara felt as if she were gliding on rails. She had never experienced anything like this since arriving in America. She thought she knew this river, at least most of the course she had traveled for so many years, but she had never encountered such a feeling of uncertainty. He knew the preliminaries of any storm: the calm waters, the torrid climate, the electricity in the air that was slowly transforming those signs into other

more certain signs of a storm: the drop in temperature, the wind that was waking up from its laziness, the sky that was recruiting clouds like soldiers dressed in black.
But this afternoon I felt afraid.
"Old man, more speed!" he shouted towards the bow.
The man returned to the stern and went below deck. The engine's hum gradually increased, occasionally sputtering, almost coughing, and the clangs of metal could be heard as the old man seemed to be trying to revive the machinery. He surfaced again and asked if it was enough. Mara watched the clouds to the north. They wouldn't reach Resistencia without first enduring a storm; it would take a week even maintaining that speed, which she already knew was impossible. She tried to calculate how many miles they had left to the next town. In truth, she already knew there wasn't one closer to Las Moscas, where she was to meet Valverde. The place was on a bend with a good dock sheltered by many trees, where the Mbaré River flowed gently into the Paraná. There was still a long way to go, that much was certain. She had made this journey with Santiago in better time than they were taking now, and the trip had already seemed long, between those riverbanks that sometimes seemed so close they would trap the boat. And more than the distance, what troubled her was a feeling that reached her from the jungle, or perhaps from the villages hidden behind the foliage of the trees. She looked up at the treetops, and the sky seemed to move south.
She remembered the voyage across the Atlantic; it was there that the vertigo began, the one that never left her, and to which she had only grown accustomed by always being on board. When she went ashore, the absolute stillness regenerated the vertigo, and then she saw the roofs of the houses where she stayed, or even the sky itself, constantly moving. The roofs or the sky had weight, and the fear of collapse was so unbearable that she needed to get out. But how could she escape the earth, when the only possibility of horizontal movement was nothing more than the movement of what was above her? The only real way out was vertical, upwards.
That's why she watched the birds with such anxiety when she was on deck; the flapping of their wings filled her with a surge as if she herself had wings. She needed to be on a moving surface, and then the movement of the sky became an imaginary motion, and its stillness calmed her. You can't

fly on a moving surface; the wind requires that the place it passes over be still. She knew the fallacy of these sensations. Nothing is still, not even for a moment; the world moves and carries us along. But space is one thing, and time is another dimension that can give space another meaning. What moves moves through time, but if time didn't exist, how could things move? The day the old women took her to have an abortion, and she discovered another condition of her soul, she knew that the center of her life would be that timeless center: her on the roof of the house, watching the three women sitting in the living room.

But now she couldn't climb, and gazing at the sky, enclosed by clouds like dark stone, calmed her, and yet now the river was beginning to move, and that was what unsettled her. A hand rested on her waist, and she jumped. José and Mara looked at each other like a pair of strange enemies. The wind had picked up, and the cold was growing rapidly. Mara's hair was disheveled and whipped around her face, and her body trembled. José hugged her as a way of holding her back, because he felt the absurd thought that she might be lost in the air, as if she could take flight.

She let herself be embraced, but regaining her usual temper, she said:

- Get out! Can't you see we need to prepare for the storm!

She ordered the old man to stay below to control the engine, and told José to control the rudder; he had nothing more to do than stay in the middle of the river. She began to stow what was loose on deck and plug the openings.

Two hours later the sky had completely darkened, and the wind was stronger, but the river was still calm with waves that barely lashed the boat, pushing it rather than damaging it.

Mara finished what she was doing and approached José. Both of them kept their eyes fixed on the center of the river.

-It's getting more and more frizzy.

-You're very skilled with the helm.

-I have sailed ships at sea…

She stared at him, and he said to himself:

-There are many things you don't know about me, where is the little witch you were telling me about?

Mara crossed her arms, she longed for a drink, but she knew she needed to stay lucid through the storm.

"You don't know what you're saying," he replied.
-Then explain it to me, because so far I'm not very convinced by you.
He knew he was provoking her, but that was how he liked to see her: flustered because he was showing strength, and not the imitation of a housewife in whom hugs and love were beginning to sow seeds.
The engine rattled and the old man cursed as he shoveled coal onto the fire. Smoke billowing from the rickety funnel at the bow further darkened the sky above them, while the wind, now stronger but undecided, swirled and dispersed the smoke.
Mara began to speak, and at first I could hardly hear her; the wind through the foliage of the coasts made flocks take flight with noisy flapping that seemed to compete with the machines.
When we arrived in Buenos Aires, Santiago spent many days trying to find out where his brother was. We walked from boarding house to boarding house, along the riverfront and then further west, where there was more countryside than city. Every time he asked, they sent him somewhere even more distant, and we were tired of walking. Finally, we found a ranch hand in Flores who told him that Facundo had gone to Entre Ríos. He was quite a bit older than Santiago and had come to America about ten years earlier. Santiago was just a boy when his brother came, and he waited until he was older to travel, but in Spain he had to stay and support his parents, and he resented all of that. He was almost always in a bad mood, and I think he learned to be a hypocrite to survive. That's what he tried to do with me, but from the beginning he realized he couldn't fool me, which is why he treated me the way he did.
"Looks like you liked it a little..." said José, without letting go of the helm or taking his eyes off the center of the river. The waters were slightly choppy, the storm was coming very slowly, almost making itself known to end that heavy heat that brought restless and unbearable mosquitoes.
"Who says it wasn't like that... he was a man, after all, like all of you. You're all terrible and stupid and you can't explain yourselves except with blows, but when you fall asleep and have nightmares, or cry, you're like unprotected children. You're like orphans who are never comforted."
José looked at her for a moment. Mara's gaze was fixed on the river; she seemed to be counting the waves that crashed against the bow and died beneath the hull. She was changed; her anger had been replaced by

sadness and melancholy. This bothered him because it reminded him of the anguish he needed to keep subdued. He would have liked to throw her to the ground and penetrate her to hear her scream rise above the flapping of the birds crossing the river, so like the sound of bats.

We took a boat that took us upriver in search of his brother. We stopped in several towns, but no one could tell us anything. We had to earn money to eat, so we stayed in the last town, and Santiago started working as a cart driver sometimes, other times as a porter or woodcutter, whatever he could find. We stayed in an abandoned shack on the banks of a nearly dry stream. Santiago would come back drunk, late, and after yelling at me, he'd throw himself on top of me, and I'd let him, but I wouldn't let him finish inside me. I already had a daughter, and he'd rejected her, so I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of giving her another one. I thought it would bother him, but the first time I pushed him away, he laughed and hit me a few times. I thought it was out of anger, but for him, in his drunkenness, it was complicity and pleasure. From then on, we always did it that way, and it excited him. Why did I ever think of going along with it? I think it was because I liked it too. I no longer missed Roberto's timid sweetness, which stemmed more from guilt than sincerity. I liked the ruggedness of this area, the heat, the solitude among the tall trees. It was no longer the open countryside of Spain, exposed to the sun. The enormous trees protected me, or hid me. When winter came, there was no more work. We spent days starving in the shack. We lived off fishing, because Santiago hardly knew how to hunt, and even then, there wasn't much to catch. One afternoon, a steamer arrived and anchored not far from the shore. It was the old man with his son on this very boat. They asked us what we were doing there, sitting on the little beach next to the shack. We shrugged. Santiago was thin, with his torso bare, a long beard, and his straight hair covering his ears down to his shoulders. I don't even know how I looked; I think like a dirty witch. The old man was happier than he is now, much younger, I think, even though not many years have passed. He called out to us, asking if we wanted to come along; there was always work somewhere along the riverbanks. We had nothing left but the clothes on our backs; we'd pawned everything we'd brought from Spain in Buenos Aires. We climbed aboard, and that same afternoon we continued our journey up or down the river, depending on the work available. The old man traded in anything that

could be sold. The boat was full of merchandise of all kinds. But what brought him the most profit was yerbaluz (a type of herb). The Indians grew it, and the old man bought it from them for next to nothing, or for food or clothing. Then he went from town to town, selling it to those who consumed it or to others who took it to Buenos Aires or Córdoba.
"And what is that?" asked José.
"Yerbaluz? Can't you imagine? Everyone likes it, I've tried it many times, and it calms me down, but others can't get enough of it. For almost two years we were in that partnership, living on the boat and exploring almost the entire river up to Brazil. Then there was Valverde de Amusco, who worked with prostitutes. Sometimes we'd take two or three from one town to another, spend the night until they finished their work, and then we'd leave again."
- And were you offered a place in those groups?
I was provoking her, to see if she'd take the bait.
"A single woman with three men on this ship for months, was she going to be prudish?" The old man's son started groping me the very day we met. That's when the fight with Santiago started. I enjoyed the fights; I felt better every time they both ended up exhausted and beaten to a pulp. Then I'd go after the old man, who was calmer. His beard prickled my face, but his slowness made me feel like I was in control of all three of them. That's why I started ordering them around. I told them where to go or how much to charge. The prostitutes trusted me and asked for my advice. But that all ended soon. Santiago started hitting me more and more often, and the other two just watched without intervening. It suited the old man's son, because when I was completely worn out on the mattress, he'd come and penetrate me even when Santiago was right there, asleep from being drunk. But one day he woke up and they started fighting. Santiago ended up losing, as usual, and then he turned on me. That night we arrived at a town, Las Moscas, where we're headed now, if we get there before the storm. It's a bigger town than anything you'll find for miles around. There's a well-known brothel there; that's where the prostitutes from almost the entire river come from and end up. Santiago grabbed my arm, we got off the boat, and he dragged me along like that night in Spain. I resisted and didn't want to walk, but it wasn't so much out of anger as because my whole body ached. He took me to the brothel and left me there. The next

morning, when I woke up in a bed, the owner and the women were taking care of me. They told me the boat had left.
Night was falling very quickly. The boat moved swiftly against a darkness that had settled over the river like nothing she had seen in all those years. The waves were choppy, and the bow rose and fell in abrupt jolts. José handled the helm with ease; she had to admit it. When would he tell her about his life? Perhaps she would have to guess later, in the silence of sleep, while she slept, or thought she slept.
I spent almost three years there. Valverde would sometimes come, and I don't think he would have minded taking me with the others to some towns to work, but I knew Santiago had told him to leave me there. He never slept with me again while I was in the brothel. The others told me he hung around the house, coming to collect his commission for my work. They were jealous of him, so when he came to collect, they'd tell him I was the best and that all the men in the area preferred me. They pretended to be angry because he wouldn't have believed it otherwise. But the truth was, I worked like any other woman; I couldn't refuse, even if I was tired and in pain. The men all ended up being the same, and that's why they didn't come after me as much anymore. My face told them my body was like a corpse. One day, one of them complained to Tatiana, the one who ran the place. Most of the girls were Polish immigrants, because blondes or redheads charged more, unlike what happens with Indian or Black women, further north. The guy stormed out protesting because he didn't want to pay. I heard everything from the bed where he'd left me, naked and with semen on my face. While I cleaned myself up, slowly, like an actress removing her makeup in front of a mirror, I heard the shouting from the door. There was a scuffle and chairs were thrown, and then a door slammed. "She's dead," I heard him yell. I hadn't paid, I knew it. Then Tatiana came in to see me. I snapped out of my reverie, and instead of a mirror I saw the rotten wooden ceiling, and instead of makeup the hardening remnants of semen. It was an invisible mask, and my skin felt like parchment. "You're leaving tomorrow," she said. In the morning, I didn't need to grab the few clothes I'd managed to buy during that time; the girls had gathered them in a bag and walked me to the door. Santiago was waiting outside. "You did well," he said, "you're good for nothing." We walked side by side, without speaking. He'd broken up his partnership with

the old man, so we had neither a boat nor a house. Everyone in town already knew us, and since we were oddballs, they wanted nothing to do with us. We walked south, sometimes following the riverbank, other times venturing deeper into the jungle. When we passed through a town, he bought food with what little money he had left of what I'd earned. He persistently asked for work at the stores or on the docks, and when they pushed him away to stop bothering them , he'd get angry and aggressive, pull out a knife, and threaten everyone. People would surround him and insult him like a rabid dog. What could I do...? I think that day I stopped trying to understand him, and I pushed my way through the crowd and approached him. “Come on, Santiago,” I said, grabbing his arm like I was his wife. We left the town and continued walking south. Soon we found the dock where they gave us work. We had to help unload and load cargo from the arriving boats, mostly fishing boats, and also load the carts that carried goods to the towns. After making arrangements with the dock manager, who left in a boat downriver, we went to the shack where we were going to live. It was already dark, but I had grown accustomed to walking through all those places full of weeds and vermin. Inside it was even darker because the only window was boarded up. When I went in, I groped around in the darkness. Santiago had stayed by the broken door trying to figure out how to fix it. Then I felt a sharp prick in my right hand when I fell to the floor after tripping over some planks. I cried out in pain and at the same time heard the hiss of the yarará snake as it slithered away through the door. Immediately I heard Santiago's footsteps and the thud of the axe. The snake was dead, and the fool walked in, happier than I'd ever seen him. I only caught a glimpse of him by the light streaming through the door, but that smile and that joy didn't last long. "It bit me," I said, crying. We went outside and he looked at my hand. It only had a small bite on the back of my hand, and he said, "It's nothing." I was crying, not because my hand hurt too much, but because of the anguish of what I knew was going to happen to me. I slapped him across the face with my left hand, and just as he was about to retaliate, he stopped, and I saw in his eyes the face of the spoiled child I had known in Spain. A child who had grown up in comfort and been blessed by the priest close to the family. That was the man who walked me to the riverbank, telling me not to cry as he stroked my hair. We knelt on the bank, and he helped me wash the wound. He stroked my arm

like he never had before, while I watched his frightened face out of the corner of my eye. “What are we going to do?” I asked, sniffling. He thought for a moment, applied a tourniquet, and got up to walk away along the bank without saying a word. “Where are you going?” I shouted, because I thought he was capable of abandoning me. He wouldn't answer. My hand hurt because it was swelling, and the pain radiated to my shoulder. Time passed, I don't know how long, I think hours or a whole day. I lay down on the bank and put my hand in the water. It cooled me somewhat, and I even thought about throwing myself into the river and drowning rather than dying the other way. My heart raced, and my hand throbbed as if my heart were trapped inside it, obstructed by the tourniquet. I reached for the sick woman with my left hand, but I couldn't reach her. My body felt heavy, and even my eyelids felt like two iron doors falling, unable to lift them. Santiago appeared, limping. I saw him upside down, because he was lying on his back, breathing with difficulty. I watched him approach as if in a dream, a thin, hunched man, walking as slowly as a tortoise, dragging one foot and suppressing the pain by clenching his teeth behind his lips, hidden by his beard. He knelt down and told me to eat a paste he had brought wrapped in leaves. I thought it was yerbaluz, although I had never chewed it, only smoked it by burning the dried leaves. It was bitter, and then it tasted of nothing. I fell asleep, though at that moment I thought I was dying, and that this was what death was: pain on the outside, and serenity on the inside.

Mara sighed deeply and looked at her right stump. Night had fallen.

"How much longer until we get there?" asked José.

-At least four or five hours.

-I don't think we'll get there before it gets worse.

-That's normal, but this storm is taking its time, and if it's as strong as it threatens, it's better that it's delayed and we get to Las Moscas soon.

-We'd better take cover right now in some bend in the road.

"What for? The wind will raise the river and push us against the trees, and the trees will fall on top of us. I've already seen it."

-Then let's leave the ship and camp.

Didn't I just tell you that the river will overflow its banks? Who knows how many kilometers.

-But at sea…

-The river is something else. I've known this river for six years, like I know a man.
-Okay, keep counting.
Mara saw the old man peering out of the hatch.
- Faster!
He knew that if he tried to increase the machines' power, they risked destroying them, and then they would truly be at the mercy of pure luck. He touched his stump, as if it were an amulet. It must have been around eight o'clock at night; there was still a faint light, and the wind, though not very strong, cooled the mosquito bites.
"What is that?" asked José, pointing to a cloud in the distance that was moving quickly towards them.
"Deputies," Mara said. And she had barely finished speaking when the first dragonflies appeared. Then the entire swarm passed around them, almost without touching them. They both stood still, squinting, picking the trapped insects out of their hair and the folds of their clothes. Mara suddenly felt the dragonflies speaking to her with the buzzing of their wings; she even thought she felt them land on her skin, and then she felt as light as they were. She saw their transparent wings, their long bodies like small branches lifted by four fragile crystals. Soon, however, the last of them disappeared, and the air cleared. She looked at her clothes; they were covered in dead dragonflies, but there were none on José.
"They appreciate you," he said.
Mara took them one by one and placed them on a cloth, then folded it.
-They announce the storms. They are messengers.
"And what did they tell you?" José continued with his sarcasm. It irritated her, and she knew that was what he wanted.
-Many torments after the storm.
He laughed, and Mara decided to continue telling her story.
That night, I think it was already early morning, I woke up in the shack. I wasn't in any pain, but I was very tired. I looked at my right hand and it was gone. I was so scared that I started screaming like a madwoman, but I already knew everything, just as I had known from the moment of the bite what would happen to me if I stayed alive. Santiago woke up with a start and grabbed my shoulders. But not to hit me, as I expected, but he hugged me and pressed me so tightly against his chest that I gradually stopped

trembling and stifled my screams against him. "There was nothing else I could do! Do you understand? Will you forgive me?" he repeated like a parrot, while he held me close. He had cut off my hand, and with that, he had saved my life. When he got up to add wood to the fire that kept us warm, I saw that he had one foot bandaged with dirty rags. I think I asked him what had happened, but he only told me two days later, when I was already pain-free and in better spirits. He had gone to the town where he'd had the fight and ran into the same man who had confronted him. "What do you want now?" they asked him. He was looking for yerbaluz, which was the only thing he knew to make me sleep. They wouldn't give him any because he had no money, and they beat him to make him leave. He stayed on the outskirts, waiting, knowing that I was waiting on the riverbank and that my time was running out. In the end, he managed to steal a handful of leaves from the saddlebag of a saddle propped against a stake, and as he escaped, they shot him in the leg. We stayed in that place for the entire next year, me feigning futile efforts to love him out of gratitude, but he only knew how to use beatings to convince me to truly love him. That's how we reveled in hating each other, thinking we loved each other. And to all that was added the weed, which lulled us into peaceful moments, and we alternated it with the moonshine. Then your brother and his wife arrived. Santiago and I were so drunk that I think we said something completely untoward, and they left the shack to sleep outside. We were left alone, and I confronted him about wanting to sleep with your stuck-up sister-in-law. I didn't mean it seriously; it was one of the many provocations that fueled us day and night to keep us surviving. He got genuinely angry and told me yes, that woman was much more of a woman than I was. And that's when I truly lost my temper. I grabbed a frying pan and hit him over the head. And suddenly the world came crashing down on me: part of Santiago's brain was spilling out through the crushed bone. I remembered the old women my mother had taken me to see. I am one of them, without a doubt. My strength is a concentric circle that damages itself. This time I had hurt someone else, but the spiral came back to haunt me. How to break free from this curse, I wondered ever since. But like everything I can't avoid, I tried to cover it up with my anger, which sometimes convinces me I'm strong. And the liquor sometimes helps me convince myself I'm not who I am.

*

-You killed the man who saved your life.
José spoke without letting go of the helm or taking his eyes off the center of the river, which had become increasingly turbulent. Waves crashed against the hull and splashed across the deck. They had both covered themselves with animal hides, some of which the old man and his son had hunted. How he loved to provoke her and stir up her anger! He could even feel it growing along with the intensity of the storm, but both were slow, holding back because they knew their fury would wreak havoc when it lashed out at anyone in its path. José knew this, but he would fight if necessary; he wanted to, and he wouldn't stop his sarcasm until she exploded.
"I killed the man who separated me from my daughter..." he heard her say, without even looking at him, her gaze also fixed on the rising waters.
-She did you a favor, it seems to me, or do you think she'd be better off here?
And without moving, her words traveled over every inch of the boat: the filth on deck, the dog still occasionally licking the bloodstain, the empty bottles they could stumble over anywhere, the meager scraps of food left on the rickety table or the mattress. She knew Mara's gaze was taking in all of this, and then lingering over the surface of the river, choppy and unpredictable as if it might engulf them at any moment, the solitary banks or those darkened by the tangled vegetation that could only be cut through with a machete.
The ship shook violently, its hull rattling, as the waves crashed against the bow. And it had begun to rain. José was steering skillfully, he had to admit, but he didn't say so aloud. When the hail started, Mara ran to the hatch and kicked hard.
- Full speed ahead, old man!

The only answer was the engine running louder, along with the crackling of the coal. Smoke still billowed from the short, damaged chimney, but it seemed to be suffocating in the pouring rain and the whipping wind. It was bitterly cold now, and Mara was soaked through despite the leather she had tied around her neck and waist.

"Hold on a little longer! It's only two miles to the first bend before the town." Her voice barely rose above the sounds of the water, the rain, and the engine. Hail hammered against the wood. In a corner below deck, the dog must surely be huddled together, shivering.

- And who says we'll be safe?

José's voice was louder, and for a moment she needed to cling to him; even his constant provocations represented a kind of omnipotence, because everything she thought was secure was crumbling. And in the body of that sarcastic, hurtful man when he was awake, Mara sometimes found a strange peace.

The hail intensified, shattering the glass in the bow window and cracking some of the old deck planks. The hull rose and fell with the onslaught of the waves, and José clung to the helm, paying close attention as if he were on the open sea. The shores were no longer visible, hidden by a curtain of icy stones and rain. Then, the hail began to subside. She said something, but he paid no attention, didn't even listen. He wasn't afraid, and for the first time in a long time, after that sort of self-imposed isolation in the Toba village, which had only increased his resentment and dissatisfaction, and the stubborn presence of something that had grown until the night of the rituals. The night he searched for Altea thinking of Manuel. The night he conceived a child he would never be able to conceive again. That night was an inner storm, vaster than this one that was now growing and threatening to shatter the ship's structure. He wasn't afraid of the water, the wind, or the stones. Only of the incipient and ever-present memory of the buzzing of something that fluttered around him and gripped him with the threat of a shriek.

The hail stopped, but the rain intensified. He managed to stabilize his course in the middle of the river. He knew that any change of direction, even just a few meters toward the banks, could cause them to run aground. The waters were now carrying branches and logs, and mudflats must be being shifted across the riverbed.

He was startled by a patch of tall, thick foliage he saw through the curtain of rain. He turned to starboard as fast as the old wheel could go. This was the bend Mara had mentioned, and even she hadn't expected to find it so soon. But they would run aground before reaching the shore if he didn't turn in time. The hull sounded as if it were cracking. Mara clung to him, and José felt that at last she belonged to him. He began to laugh as he turned the wheel as hard as he could, watching the thicket rush past just a few feet from the boat. Trees upon trees, birds that hadn't been able to find shelter and were dying against the ship, branches crashing onto the deck. Mara hurled insults at him and struck him helplessly, but José couldn't stop laughing because he felt ecstatic. He was like a god in the making: he had dominion over her private world, and above all, the power that emanated from Mara's body, something she didn't seem to have realized in her entire life. Could she not be the one who created that storm? Didn't that force of will of the river's nature, which she herself had admitted she hadn't seen before, coincide with the change that was taking place in her soul? Mara's soul, which was like stagnant mud, had been stirred and was now seething because of a man who brought with him a whole whirlwind inhabited by vermin.

Finally, they left the tight bend behind and found themselves on a beach clear of foliage. A few houses were visible through the rain. The waves were less strong and high, and the boat seemed to welcome the momentary respite. The wooden hull fell silent, and suddenly they realized the engine had stopped. Perhaps it was useless now, but they only needed to get as close as possible to that small cape proverbially sheltered from the wind. The town grew larger in view, but the pier was almost destroyed. Waves crashed against the shore, and the tide was rising.

"What do we do?" asked José. He had saved the boat, but it was Mara who knew that area of the river.

She gestured to a corner where she'd been before, she told him. The boat was now simply at the mercy of the current, but the wind was against them, so he could only manage to steer as he did on the high seas, taking advantage of the shifts in the wind to hopefully head where he wanted to go. Mara watched him steer as if José's body were part of the boat's structure, a flexible yet strong part, the intelligent and skillful part. The brain that had been missing all those years of going back and forth through

the poverty of the river. She realized she admired him, but she still wasn't sure if it was love or surrender. She was going to help him; she knew that much for sure.
Soon the boat began to slow down. The wind was from astern, but not enough to push it forward. The keel had struck a mudbank just under a hundred meters from the shore.
"We're ready," he said. "If the wind picks up..."
"But the river's going to rise..." Mara said, without anger or worry. She placed her hands on either side of José's head and kissed him. They embraced, soaked and now without the clothes blown off by the wind. He was shirtless, wearing his pants and boots. She wore a thick shirt and a burlap skirt clinging to her legs.
The old man opened the hatch:
“The engine’s dead,” he said, and the dog got out. Old Man and dog watched them embrace and then kneel without letting go. They saw them lie down on the floor and huddle together, panting. Old Man and dog watched, without sorrow or surprise. They weren’t two bodies but one, on a wooden shell that rocked as the river rose. But it was already night, and the feeling of unity between those bodies increased as the sound of stifled moans made them sound like a single animal being born on deck.
The old man knew many Brazilian legends. He knew that the water holds the foundation of many lives, and that sometimes beings are born there that no one has ever seen before, hiding in the thick of the jungle or submerging themselves in the river's bends where the current is less strong. Places where they can build their nests and live unseen by only a few, and those few will not even speak of them, and if they do, even fewer would believe them.
Mara and José's shadows moved like one of those wounded creatures, or perhaps like one struggling to emerge from a cocoon. A large insect, its larva transforming. There was no moon, and only the shadows of the trees shook at the mercy of the howling wind, victoriously competing with the plaintive howl of the dog that now seemed to be suffering.
The old man sat down beside him and began to pet him. Both the old man and the dog felt the rising water, slowly lifting the boat until it detached them from the mud bank.
Mara's voice sounded shrill and distressed:

"I knew it..." and he ran to the side, looking towards the coast.
"What's wrong?" asked José.
-The river is overflowing, and it's going to flood the town.
-Then we'll stay on board until the storm subsides.
But that wasn't what Mara feared. She gazed at the village, its houses slumbering in darkness. She knew everyone was holed up in their cabins, even the prostitutes in the old pavilion where she'd worked. Was that what she missed? Was she afraid the village of Las Moscas and her bad memories would die underwater? She should be glad, but she didn't seem to be.
The current grew stronger throughout the night. The boat drifted along without major jolts; the waves became increasingly gentle as the water encroached upon the land. In the now almost absolute darkness, they heard the creaking of wood beneath the hull's keel. It was the wreckage of shattered huts, above which they floated as the water covered them. They thought they heard muffled cries, and the dog on board whimpered and trembled, huddled beside Mara and José, who sat on the floor. He embraced her, she rested against his chest, stroking the dog, speaking softly to it, trying to soothe its trembling, which was also their own.
The old man wandered back and forth on deck, his hands behind his back, sober for the first time in a long time. From time to time they heard him speak in Portuguese, sometimes stopping and falling silent, as if waiting for a reply, which perhaps he sensed. He leaned over the side, looking at the water that had carried his son's body. For a moment they heard him raise his voice, as if in a gesture of anger, or perhaps of joy. The heavy rain had subsided, and now it was only a persistent drizzle that almost sounded like a purr, or perhaps that purr didn't come from the rain but from beneath the hull. And both they and the dog fell asleep together to the rhythm of the footsteps they thought they heard on deck. It was no longer just two feet treading one after the other in their almost eternal comings and goings, enveloped in incomprehensible soliloquies. They were asleep when they thought they heard four feet inhabiting the night.

*

When they awoke, the dog was barking, its front paws resting on the railing. José tried to get up, but his body ached. Mara was already awake, staring blankly at the dog. She didn't say a word; perhaps, like him, her voice was tired from shouting to be heard the night before. She got up and walked toward the railing. He saw her gazing with the same intensity as the dog at something indistinct on what must have been the nearest shore. José got up and saw no more water around him, just several kilometers of a large lake whose waters barely seemed to move, interrupted only by the treetops that had endured, like islands.

She approached where they were and saw that, though still far away, a boat with several people was drawing near. Mara waved her arms and began to shout, but it was clear that they had already been spotted and were rowing toward the boat.

"Who could they be?" he asked.

"They look like one man and several women. It must be Valverde with the women," Mara said, smiling as she leaned on the railing.

The boat approached at a serene pace over the stagnant waters, where branches, logs, clothes, bottles, and a huge amount of trash from the houses swept away by the flood floated. When the boat was barely twenty meters away, Mara shouted:

- Valverde, you son of a bitch!

The man put down the oars and stood up. He looked agitated; he certainly wasn't used to this task. There were five women of different ages in the boat, none of them beautiful enough to attract a man, José told himself, except perhaps to relieve a one-night stand.

"What can I do, Mara, I couldn't let the girls drown!" said Valverde, raising his arms and shrugging his shoulders while making a face of ridiculous resignation.

"What you didn't want was to lose your business!" she replied, laughing.

The conversation paused only so the old man could grab the boat's ropes when he was very close, and Valverde threw them to him. The old man tied them, and they began helping the man and the women aboard.

"Slow down, girls..." But they just laughed and refused help. They wore long skirts from dresses that had once been elegant, or at least pretended to be. A couple of them had traces of makeup smeared by tears.
Once aboard, Mara and Valverde embraced, and when the old man approached, he shook her hand warmly.
"My old Gonçalvez! I thought you were already dead..." Valverde's laughter spread through the ship and the women also laughed as they tried to straighten their dirty dresses.
"So the old man has a name," said José.
Valverde looked at him, squinting because the reflection of the sun on the water was intense, and extended a hand.
-Juan Valverde de Amusco, at your service. - He looked at Mara, winking at her.
-José Menéndez Iribarne, likewise.
Their hands clasped, and there was no struggle between them, as José had expected. Valverde wasn't the type of lover Mara liked; he seemed to possess a refinement that manifested itself in his mannerisms and the veiled sarcasm with which he spoke.
"I've heard about you and your business for some years now..." Valverde said.
Mara grabbed José's arm.
-So he didn't tell you anything, what did you expect? The man was an authority in Entre Ríos, he brought everything from Europe, whatever you were looking for, long and short guns, and ammunition, of course, all very cheap, but later I learned that he secluded himself in an Indian village, according to what I was told.
Mara no longer showed any signs of surprise as she discovered the various facets of José. Instead of becoming clearer, he was becoming an enigma. When would he tell her about his past? Surely she would have to discover it for herself.
- So this is the one who replaced Espinoza... and what happened to our friend? - said Valverde, looking at Mara.
He didn't wait for an answer because he raised his hands and made a gesture as if to wipe them.
Don't tell me anything, I've already heard what's being said...

"Stop being the same old son of a bitch and let's take care of the girls," Mara said. She didn't know the women, of course; many had passed through the town since she'd left. She told them to go into the cabin—that's what she called it—mocking herself and them. She was overjoyed to have these women to talk to. Since they didn't know her, they overcame their reluctance and let Mara take them by the waist. She laughed and asked them how they'd survived.

Their voices faded into the shadow of the roof. The three men were left alone, and the silence was short-lived.

"And where is Tonio?" Valverde asked the old man. Gonçalvez looked around, Valverde followed his gaze, and understood. He said nothing.

"Why didn't you tell me your name, old man?" José asked.

"Old Tonio was never very talkative; that's how he was raised, and it's part of his profession when he was young. At least that's what they told me in Brazil. Isn't that right, old friend?"

He patted Gonçalvez and hugged him, shaking him off his drowsiness.

"He always enjoyed a drink," he said, "but now he seems quite sober. He must have been scared shitless by that storm we went through."

-The truth is, he behaved like an expert...

-And indeed he is. If you had seen him steering the ships all along the coast, going with his brother collecting and leaving corpses in almost every town during the yellow fever epidemic a few years ago, and during the Paraguayan War, I won't even mention it...

"Look," said José, with his arms crossed over his chest and one hand scratching his chin, "Who would have thought it? And they paid you well?"

Gonçalvez shrugged.

"Don't be shy, Tonio. You know these times are good for your family. Look, Iribarne, the Gonçalvez family has been gravediggers for two generations back in Brazil, and I know they did the same in Europe. The thing is, people don't like dealing with them, that's why they don't say anything. Only people like us, or like Mara, for example, have any problem with them."

"And what became of your brother Lisandro?" Valverde asked.

"I know he went to Buenos Aires and started a funeral home. As far as I know, he's doing very well." These were the first clear and precise words José heard from the old man.

"And why didn't you go with him?" he asked.

"My son, Tonio, you saw what he was like. A troublemaker, he got into a lot of trouble around here. I couldn't leave him alone, especially the way he was..." He made a repeated circle with the index finger of his right hand near his temple. Suddenly, his arm jerked sharply, and the old man looked to his side. "Don't be angry, Tonio..."
Valverde and José exchanged glances.
Like father, like son. Let's go see the girls. If we're lucky, they should have already taken their dirty laundry out...

During the afternoon the heat intensified, the clouds remaining a thin, thin blanket that filtered the sun's rays and reflected them off the water. The women were almost naked inside the boat, and since Mara wouldn't let them in, they decided to take a dip in the river. They took off their clothes and plunged in. The water was murky, but cool. They swam around the boat, trying to discern the river's original course. Without compasses, they wouldn't have been able to make out anything more than a vast lake with green islands that were nothing more than the tops of the tallest trees, and sometimes just large bushes or branches adrift at sea. Valverde moved through the water like someone who had learned to swim in a city pool, cautious and using techniques that would be of little use to him if there weren't a boat nearby to rescue him. José swam without any technique or defined form; he simply floated, breathed, and drifted. He was robust and somewhat muscular; Valverde was thin and covered in light hair on his chest and legs. José had been losing his hair for some years, but Valverde had curly, somewhat long hair. He watched him swim, amused and carefree, and suddenly saw a corpse floating toward him. Deliberately, he didn't warn him; he wanted to see how he would react. He had classified him among the weak men, those who live off women's labor, and he wanted to test it. Besides, he had a feeling he was going to have a great opportunity for a long laugh and a good anecdote to tell that night.
Valverde was still distracted, gazing at some trees, perhaps thinking about how he would restart his business, when the legs of the corpse bumped against the back of his head. He turned around, startled, but realizing what had happened, he grabbed one of the feet and slid the body across the water, feeling it over, perhaps searching for something in the pockets or the folds of the clothing. After seeing that he hadn't reacted as he

expected, José didn't find it strange to see him do that, but this time he was the one surprised when he saw Valverde start swimming with one arm, holding the corpse with the other and pulling it toward the boat.
- Iribarne! Come and help me!
Joseph swam over to where he was, and speaking to him over his body, said:
- What the hell do you plan to do?
Hold it while I tie it to the helmet. Hey old man, throw me a rope!
Gonçalvez, who had been watching them from the railing while talking to himself, threw him a rope, and Valverde tied the end to one of the body's feet. Then he climbed aboard.
- What is Iribarne waiting for?
José watched as the body floated with its legs spread, wondering what Valverde was planning. He saw them both, the old man and himself, leaning over the side, waiting for him to come aboard. When he did, he sat down on deck to dry off, watching the end of the rope tied to one of the hooks, feeling the corpse bump against the hull from time to time.
- What are you going to do, Valverde?
-Business, Iribarne, like you, even though you may have forgotten about it after that time spent with the Indian teachers.
José got up, naked and dripping with water, pushed Valverde with one foot, and held him down.
If you don't like the truth, my friend, at least refrain from trampling on it. Much is already known about you two, and I'm surprised Mara doesn't know anything. That's just how she is; half the time she's drunk and runs from the truth. You're perfect for each other, it's obvious.
José let go of him and began to get dressed; Valverde did the same. They both remained silent for a long hour, during which they could hear the chatter of the women waking up after their rest and beginning to put on their dry dresses again. The afternoon was fading, but not the heat.
-That body is going to smell really bad...
Don't believe it. The water is fresh, and it will stay that way as long as the weather above the water doesn't change. We're going to sell them, my friend; Gonçalvez can explain.
The old man sat behind them, talking without looking at them.
"I'm just taking them," he said.

-That's true, but without the old man we couldn't get them to the hospital in Corrientes.

For the rest of the afternoon, the old man kept busy fixing, or trying to fix, the machinery. The sounds of tools could be heard, along with the old man's groans and protests, cursing and swearing at someone else.
"What's all the commotion about?" Mara shouted, kicking the hatch. Then the old voice stopped, and for a few seconds Mara stood still, confused, no doubt, because she thought she recognized the voice of young Tonio.
The river was full of dead fish, undoubtedly contaminated with the town's garbage, so they resorted to using cans that had been sitting in the storage room for over a year. The men salvaged planks from the water and assembled a large table and several chairs. As they hammered, they could smell the women getting dressed. Without perfume or makeup, they always managed to present themselves, even if they weren't naturally beautiful. As darkness fell, they emerged in their old, but clean, dresses, their hair styled in various ways; even Mara looked special. Undoubtedly, contact with these women had reminded her that she, too, was a woman, and that submitting to a man wasn't surrendering her nature but rather highlighting it. This was what José thought as he watched her set the table. The six women and three men sat around it, and Valverde, the one who trafficked in prostitutes and corpses, began to recount how they had survived the storm.
-Since I saw the storm coming, I told them to get ready to go to the dock, to wait for you….
The women all started talking at once: "But you didn't know when they were coming... that son of a bitch wanted to kill us... do you think we're stupid?"
Valverde raised his hands like a bishop to silence them.
"Calm down, my darlings, I know the coast better than you gringas. Or didn't you five come from Europe and only arrive a few months ago? Blondes earn more than black women, that's why you're with me. If you don't like it, you can leave. You can find prostitutes anywhere."
So they continued to protest, angry, but not entirely, because that night they were having fun. There was liquor, and the canned food was better than what they cooked in the cabin.

"I'll continue my story," Valverde said, acting like a refined lecturer before an audience of intellectuals. José and Mara were amused by the newcomers' witticisms. She was happy and had abandoned her self-absorption. She laughed, shouted, and swore just like when José had first met her, and he liked it.
-I convinced them to go to the pier…
-You dragged us along….
-I convinced them, etc., etc., and we spent the whole afternoon waiting.
-With the unbearable heat and the mosquitoes that were eating us alive…
-You could say that was the backdrop for our wait…
Valverde was a showman, a consummate actor. He moved his hands in gestures that matched what he was saying.
The sky was darkening and the foliage of the trees was moving strongly and tremendously with the wind….
"But tell me something? Were you so sure we'd arrive soon?" asked José.
One of the women, the one José had seen with smeared makeup upon arrival, now had a clean face, but her lips were a deep red and her cheeks had a natural rosy glow. She wasn't very young; none of them seemed to be, as if they had been plucked from some village in Eastern Europe while tending their farms or walking alone through the streets of some city. She had been watching him while he pretended not to notice, and he heard her speak into the conversation for the first time:
"How could I be sure! He's a scoundrel. He pretends to know about rivers, but there are others who know about the sea, which is much bigger..."
After the initial shock, everyone laughed at her, but Mara and José exchanged a look whose meaning they both recognized, and which was only the first hint of what they knew was going to grow. And José encouraged it.
"What is your name, miss?" he asked.
"Carla," he replied, and the blush he had gained from the laughter at his comment became even more intense.
"Well, Carlita, don't blush so much. If we're laughing, it's because of your innocence..."
Everyone started laughing again, and she continued with her surprised expression until her eyes began to water. José handed her a handkerchief.

"I recognize in you the legacy of a once-noble lineage that has fallen on hard times. I ask everyone not to turn on this young lady. Perhaps she was a teacher in her village, and was seduced by lies of prosperity in America."
Everyone went along with the current of that after-dinner drama, which Valverde had started and which José had joined. Except Mara, who, without realizing it, with her burgeoning confusion, was also becoming part of the melodrama being performed.
-Now that the little teacher of the orphaned children has been comforted by her prince charming, I will finish, if you will allow me, the tale of our fortunate adventure.
Amid laughter and further interruptions, Valverde recounted that he had seen the smoke since midday, and that he was certain it was the only steamship scheduled to pass through that latitude that day. But above all, he had a premonition he called strange—as if all premonitions weren't strange—when he thought he saw the ship reflected in the overcast sky.
"I didn't actually see it, I admit, but rather perceive it as a reflection of something else. I saw several flocks leaving the riverbanks and heading south, from where you were supposed to be coming. It seemed strange to me, but I didn't pay it any more attention until after a while, when I saw what I told you about, the image of the ship. It even occurred to me, for a second, that the birds were lifting the ship. And I thought to myself: they'll bring it back faster, and I was reassured. Was it a hallucination or a miracle?"
Valverde enjoyed watching the women's faces light up with excitement, his mocking expression gradually shifting into one of genuine conviction. But Mara's face was pale. She remembered what she had felt the previous afternoon: the flocks of birds and the sensation of soaring.
Valverde unwittingly destroyed his entire fantastic fairy tale castle when he continued.
That was my hope, because I'm not the materialistic man you think I am…
The women threw empty cans at him, laughing and completely drunk. He defended himself as best he could, and when he was finally free of their attack, dirty and with a look weary of liquor, the lecturer's gestures returned, unharmed.
The truth is less appealing, but I must admit that my foresight, almost scientific, I might say, prevailed above all else. I knew the storm was

coming, of course, and that it was going to be stronger than usual; the signs in the atmosphere told me so. There was going to be a tremendous flood. That's why I got them out of the cabin when I went to the dock and saw the boat moored there. If we were ten minutes late, that boat would be stolen. So they and I got in and headed away from the town. Then the storm came, so I tried to steer the boat into a bend, and we held out there while the water rose. We couldn't stay sheltered by the trees, because at any moment they would have come crashing down on us. That's why my arms are all mangled. I rowed, dodging the waves, which weren't so strong there, and trying to keep the boat afloat , because the young ladies, so delicate, were only concerned with screaming as if there were a god for whores.

Juan Valverde was no longer acting, and only sarcasm remained the evident essence of his personality. Everyone fell silent, and the sound of the body hitting the hull could be heard. The women already knew; it was part of Valverde's business. The impacts were becoming more frequent; there must be several bodies being refloated. Gonçalvez stood up, without needing to respond to Valverde's silent gaze, and walked slowly to the deck, murmuring to someone beside him. He took off his clothes, grabbed a long, thick rope, and dove into the river.

That night the women would sleep indoors and the men on deck. Mara warned them that she would beat anyone who came near them. Around dawn, José woke up and saw Gonçalvez sitting beside them, holding his palms to a weak fire he had improvised. He was shivering. José asked him if the fishing had been plentiful; the other nodded.

- And you, my friend? What's stopping you from taking advantage of all those shells? I saw you looking very enthusiastic a little while ago…

José wanted to wait until Mara fell asleep. Maybe it would work out, maybe it wouldn't. But what could happen other than Mara getting angry like she did before? He got up quietly, his feet bare, but he couldn't stop the old floorboards from creaking. He went to the entrance, listened to the women's breathing, and one of them snored. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, and recognized Mara sleeping on the cot, Carla already huddled in a corner on the floor. He walked in silence, his footsteps now silent. He was confident he could reach her and touch her without startling her. It was easier than he expected; Carla was awake. She

whispered something in his ear as he bent down and lay on top of her. She licked his ear, and her hands slipped inside his pants. And then everything stopped, as if he had suddenly fallen asleep and woke with a start. Mara was standing beside him with a splintered piece of wood in her left hand. He tried to get up, but she stopped him by putting her foot on his chest. She had hit him on the back of the neck with that piece of wood.
- You bitch! You could have killed me!
- That's what I'm going to do, you piece of shit!
He raised the stick again, but stopped. José Menéndez Iribarne was on the floor, naked and devoid of any sarcasm. The others had woken up and come closer. One was hugging Mara; the others looked at him with rage and contempt. They were almost naked, without bras, covering themselves with blankets. He could smell the scent of urine between their sweaty legs.
"Do you want us to do it?" one of them asked. Mara wasn't going to answer.
"We'll take care of the other one later."
Then the one who had spoken snatched the stick from his hands and, before he could react, struck José on the head. Blood began to flow from his forehead, then from his mouth, but before he could do anything, not even cover his face with his arms, they all began kicking him together, with such force that he could do nothing but crawl toward the deck, while they followed him, continuing to kick him in the back and ribs. When he tried to get up, they beat his legs with the stick, and if he tried to cover his face, they beat his arms.
He didn't know how much time had passed; the kicks didn't hurt as much anymore because they landed on the same spot that was already numb. He tasted blood in his mouth, and his words slurred when he tried to speak. He saw the old man's campfire; he was close now. And he touched Valverde's bare feet. He raised his head as high as he could, but since it wasn't very high, he turned around and saw a face with its usual hateful irony.
"I should have warned you sooner, my friend. Please excuse me. But as you've probably noticed, these are no ordinary shells."

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The next morning, the men had laid José on the cot in the cabin. Mara saw them carry him in, one holding him by the shoulders and the other by the feet. She stood in the doorway, arms crossed, her eyes glazed, but her expression betrayed the weariness. She hadn't slept the rest of the night, and they knew she had searched for bottles of rum and drunk them. But she let them pass. The other women came out without protest, passing by her, one stroking her shoulder, others whispering something in her ear. Then they leaned on the gunwale, watching the boat tied up at the stern, carrying the corpses. They were used to it by now; Valverde did this at least twice a year, and if he didn't run into Gonçalvez, he did it himself. But the old man only bothered to lift them into the boat; they had heard him dive in, as well as the thud of the hard bodies against the hull and the heavy work of hauling them aboard. The silence of human voices accompanied the night, however, they heard the groans and labored breathing of old Tonio, and from time to time his conversation with someone who was undoubtedly his son, because he had mentioned his name several times.

That's why Mara hadn't been able to sleep, and she'd seen José come in and head toward where the other woman was. If she'd been asleep, nothing would have happened; it would have just been another fling in the life of that man who had invaded her life and begun to change it. Ignorance is sometimes bliss, she told herself, but one way or another, he would have found out. She'd been used to knowing things that others discovered much later, even though she was surprised to discover that she'd known them long before, without remembering how or when they'd entered her memory. Most of the time they were insignificant things, and mainly about other people. As for what concerned her, that feeling was more obtuse and uncertain.

He saw Valverde leave.

-I'm going to take one of the barrels to the cabin; it needs to be washed every day.

We don't have much water, and who knows when we'll find a village...

-I know…

-And you will take care of healing him…the girls and I are not going to touch him.

"That's fine by me, they've played it enough already," he said. "Come on, Tonio, help me get a barrel up from the cellar!"
The old man didn't come out.
"Old man!" Valverde called again, and then the old man appeared. "What's wrong with you, are you deaf now?"
-I thought.…
-Yes, we already realized you're talking to yourself. But your son isn't here…
The old man looked at Mara and followed Valverde. She saw them carrying the barrel and heard them talking to José, who was groaning. She went to the entrance and saw Valverde wiping his wounds with clean, damp cloths. The women had beaten him with the tips and heels of their shoes, and she had beaten him with splintered wood. His body was covered in bruises and deep, extensive wounds.
Valverde saw her peeking out.
-He has several broken ribs, and possibly internal bleeding, who knows.
She didn't ask, feigning indifference. Valverde removed the cloth that was cooling José's face and saw it was swollen. She almost didn't recognize him. She heard his answers to Valverde's questions, but they were only monosyllables and sometimes just stifled cries.
At midday, the old man went ashore to continue repairing the machinery. They had set the boat adrift, knowing that the current, though very slight, might carry them to a village where they could find food and water. In the afternoon, Valverde got off the boat and climbed into the dinghy where the corpses were. Mara and the women watched him with their usual curiosity and wonder. Valverde knew about medicine and medications. They never knew how he had learned all that, and when they asked him, he replied that his grandparents and parents had taught him when he was a boy, but the rest he had learned from his own experience. He had books in the cabin in Goya where he spent little time, at least that's what he had told them. It was also said that he knew how to open corpses and dissect them. The women had always thought it was all lies; many people didn't like Valverde. Generally, only those who wanted to sell or buy something from him approached him, but it seemed as if he was the one choosing them.
They saw him pull back the tarpaulin covering the bodies, standing at the bow and sprinkling lime to keep them in the best possible condition until

they reached their destination. Mara had asked him who bought them, and he had replied that many people did: mainly hospitals for doctors to study, but also others who used parts of the bodies to make medicine. The Indians, especially, knew a great deal about these preparations. Of course, there were also the mentally ill, but he didn't care about that, as long as he got paid. He was shirtless and wearing black trousers. From his gestures, he looked like a young priest arriving on a mission among the indigenous people, walking carefully over the backs of the dead and scattering with his hands the dust from which we all come.

Mara heard him say something. She tried to watch his lips, but they were still. The voice, however, like a *deep lament,* reached her ears clearly. Was it coming from the river, still choked with planks, branches, and filth, and also from some other bodies that were still floating ashore? Then she looked to her side, because she thought she saw the old man leaning beside her. But there was no one there, and from the hold she could hear the hammering of the machinery. The prayer—for that's what it was—continued to bother her, growing louder in her right ear, and even the voice was clearer. It was like the one she remembered hearing at Mass when the family sometimes went there in their village in Spain. A deep, mournful echo of Latin prayers, incomprehensible, but which took root in her memory because of their insistent monotony. And suddenly she recognized young Tonio's voice. She looked to her side, scanned almost the entire deck, but the voice was practically whispering in her ear. She could even smell his skin. Tonio was still angry, but his voice was tearful. Was he suffering, perhaps, and trying to tell her? Was he blaming her?

"Why didn't you come sooner? What do you want?" she asked aloud to the air around her.

The breeze answered him, carrying the scent from the boat, and some of the lime dust Valverde kept throwing. Then some of that lime settled on the railing, and then in the air it began to form the figure of a man. First the head, the shoulders, the arms resting on the railing, the back. The dust settled and outlined the contours.

Mara stepped back. She wasn't going to let him touch her. She remembered hearing old Sottocorno say, when they brought her there, that contacting a dead person was one thing, but letting them touch you was quite another. Often, you didn't come back from that. They're searching for

something, they speak and communicate as best they can. They suffer because they can't say what's happening to them. They need to cling to something, they flail about in their space, unable to grasp anything that once felt concrete. But when one of them, the witches, sees them as if they were as concrete as before, it's as if they hadn't died. For a moment, the intimate connection between two beliefs based solely on sensory appearances is forged. Because while everything is appearance, everything is also real. Reality is based on the security of the senses, the handrails that soothe the conscience and lessen fear, covering ignorance with a veneer of numbers and colors. Colors attract, numbers explain. And finally, contact convinces. When we realize it, it's already too late. They have taken us to the other side, or they possess us irrevocably.

The voice of old Sottocorno flowed into her memory with such clarity that it was as if she had returned to that roofless house in the countryside of her childhood. She ran to the cabin entrance. The women lay idly on the deck, and when they saw her, they asked if something was wrong. She didn't answer. She leaned against the doorframe, looking alternately inward and out at the river. José was a real body that calmed her restlessness. She wasn't going to go in; she didn't want to give in, but seeing him there did her good. In contrast, the bodies in the river still unsettled her. She didn't know what to do with them because she thought they were looking for her to ask for something she couldn't or wouldn't give. How could she answer their questions? Mara felt they were more frightened than she was, and that fear was relentless. It was, perhaps, like José's pain expressed on his suffering face. How would he look with such pain for years and years, always the same? The body gets used to it; matter is like that. But the dead did not possess a substance that followed the laws of physiology, the rules of chemistry, or the scars of anatomy. Their pain was born of an all-encompassing absence, of an oppressive yet dizzying void, of what was lost and what was loved, within reach of hands that no longer existed: never again smelled, never again heard, never again touched. The pain of an unattainable presence, the pain of absence like a sharp stone that cannot be removed from the hand.

During the nights of the following week they slept on deck; it didn't bother them, they said, because it was too hot to sleep in the cabin. The water was

dwindling, and the river was still a small, shoreless sea. From time to time they passed by the small islands formed by the treetops, and with luck they found nests that had remained undisturbed, with dead birds that could still be eaten. They tried fishing, but only hauled up rotten fish or scraps of garbage.

The women feigned indifference to José's health, but Valverde knew that if they had given up their place, it was out of some faint sense of remorse. He spent almost all his time at the mattress, washing his body and changing his cloths several times a day. He gave him water to drink, but half the time it was wasted because he couldn't swallow. He could barely open his lips because they were so swollen, and he only managed to clear his throat with dry breaths. Valverde checked him meticulously: his pulse, his heart rate, and his breathing. He turned him over every few hours so that his skin wouldn't be further damaged, but he couldn't prevent ulcers from forming in the sores.

On the following Sunday morning, they had been adrift for eight days. Carrion birds had appeared several days earlier, circling the boat. The bodies in the boat certainly attracted them, but for now, they had enough with the remains floating in the rest of the river. Many insects infested the boat. The women amused themselves by killing them, but they were terrified of the spiders. Only Mara wasn't afraid of them; she crushed them with her shod or bare feet. There were rats that must have come aboard after traveling on planks. The old man didn't miss the opportunity to kill and cook them. He did it calmly, and Valverde would then regain his sarcasm, which was a sign that he was temporarily abandoning his gloom and restoring his good humor for a few hours. The old man would sit on the floor to eat, extending his hand with a piece of meat on the end of his knife to share with the women, mocking them when they showed disgust.

That afternoon he had cooked two large rats, and when they were ready, he prepared two tin plates and placed one beside him with a piece of meat. Was it an invitation for someone? Mara accepted what she thought was a challenge. She sat down next to the old man, by the plate. Tonio looked at her in confusion; she tried to laugh, reaching for the piece of meat. But it was gone. She felt a chill and heard the women applauding her. They were celebrating her courage.

-But I didn't...

That's when the flies appeared.

It was the largest swarm she had ever seen, not even in the Spanish countryside where locust plagues were so commonplace. They appeared suddenly, almost without a sound, as if they had emerged from the river itself. They surrounded the boat and everything they could see in the sky. Mara got up and looked for tarpaulins and cloths to cover themselves. The women wanted to go into the cabin, but when she went in first, she saw that José's entire body was covered in flies, attracted by his sores. Valverde pushed his way through the women, but they moved aside when they saw how the flies seemed to be devouring José. Mara began to shoo them away with her hands, but she couldn't do it without touching and brushing against his body, and he began to scream in pain. Valverde yelled at her to throw water on him, and they both took water from the barrel with two containers and poured it over him. The flies moved away, but the swarm didn't let up, and many more settled on the sores again. Then he told her to keep pouring water while he rubbed ointment on his body. They spent more than half an hour doing the same thing over and over. The water in the barrel finally ran out, but Valverde had managed to cover almost all the wounds. There were fewer flies now, but they circled around them now that they couldn't settle on José's body.

Mara and Valverde were exhausted, and outside they could hear the women's shouts and protests. The old man hadn't moved from his spot; the small fire where he'd cooked the rats had offered him some protection from the flies, but there was something about him they didn't understand. The flies had settled in the air, forming the outline of an indistinct shape. The old man then tried to shoo them away with a rag, and they detached themselves from whatever they were clinging to. He did the same thing over and over again throughout the rest of the day, while in the cabin, almost the same thing was happening: the flies, with their unyielding tenacity, persisted in settling on the sores. Mara, now tired, sat down on the straw mattress and could do nothing but watch them walk across the ulcers and rub their front legs with relish. They were mostly green and large. The buzzing was unbearable. She shooed away many dead flies lodged in her hair, but mainly she tried to keep them away from José's face. She smeared her hands with the ointment and began to cover José's face, stroking him and wiping away the flies at the same time. The body was like

that of a dead man. She thought of Santiago Espinoza and the fragments of brain that had spilled from his skull. She thought of young Tonio and the knife in his side. Then, of the blows from the splintered stick on José's back and face, and of the kicks. Santiago no longer had a mind with which self-awareness could persist, because that was what the witches said: the soul is not only immaterial, and the closest thing to immateriality in the body while we are alive is the immanent energy in the nervous system. That is why the dead have the ability to remain within the realm of the senses. According to what she had been told, he had been buried, and that meant peace for them. Tonio, however, was a bitter man, and he had died lucid, in a fight fueled by rage. His only burial was the river water, which swells bodies until they become a pulp only carrion fish crave.

José Menéndez Iribarne had arrived at her ship with all the trappings of a Spanish gentleman, closed off from feelings and expression, austere, cynical, and a liar, but all of that was compensated for by the way his hands and body embraced her, by the way his lips kissed her. His beard and curly hair, the hair on his body, the contours of his shoulders and pelvis. José's body spoke for him, beyond his control. That's why, during the nights they slept together, she enjoyed it, even though it pained her to hear him murmur in his sleep, to see him move his hands as if he were caressing or wrestling with someone. Those gestures and movements told her more about him than all the words he didn't want to say. The more he hid, the more she learned of his past through his body.

But now she didn't know what was going through José's mind, or even if he was awake or conscious. He didn't speak because he couldn't; his lips were raw and blistered. The flies had worsened the ulcers, and there was no way to get rid of them completely. They swarmed inside the cabin. Valverde lit a piece of cloth and tried to use the smoke to keep them away. He had sat down on the crate where most of them had spent so much time. At night he was so exhausted that he would lie down next to José, trying not to touch him, huddled against the opposite edge. She had seen them like that when she woke up in the middle of the night, parched: two men weary of their own lives, stubbornly clinging to life on the tide of remorse, only finding rest by letting distant thoughts of innocence and disillusionment drift by in those hours of deep sleep. What were they dreaming about? she had wondered. And for a few moments, in the darkness and silence, a whole

crowd invaded the cabin. Obsession, stubbornness, nonconformity, rebellion, insubordination in the face of death: that was Valverde. But in José, peace and war alternated in such insistent succession that it became unbearable; the pleasure of peace turned to guilt, and then war arrived. And each battle hardened him more, and that hardness desensitized the skin of his spirit. José's soul must have been like his conscience: irritated by pleasure suddenly interrupted by guilt, and displeasure forced to be received as the only means of expiation. José's soul was like the bitter fruit of his body.

All through Sunday night until Monday morning, she lay beside him. She placed her only hand gently on José's chest, ready to remove it the moment she saw him suffer. She felt his breathing very shallowly, but she knew he was aware of whose hand it was. Perhaps he will die, she thought. I will have killed him, like the others. She would never feel him inside her again, when the ecstasy was not only physical, but a sensation of being inhabited by an entire jungle where the trees were towering cathedrals, and among the green foliage drifted the chant of prayers raised to heaven from the leaf litter. When he moved away from her, she could smell the sweet scent of ancient flesh beneath the dry leaves: at the bottom there were always the dead bodies of animals, either killed or hopelessly ill.

She thought of Elsa. She would never see her daughter again, she would never have another. She had loathed and dismissed the idea. José was right: Mara killed what she loved.

All day Monday the women lay on deck, some moaning, others whimpering because they thought they were going to die. Then they calmed down and looked for things to do. The old man was still stubbornly trying to fix the machinery. Valverde, now that Mara was taking care of the sick man, had gone to the boat and returned with a body. They saw him laboriously hoist the corpse, wrapped in a burlap sack, aboard, then open the hatch and go into the hold. No one asked what he was going to do.

That night José opened his eyes for the first time in many days. His eyelids were no longer so swollen. Mara saw him and smiled at him.

"José," he said. "How are you?"

She knew the question was foolish, but what else could she say? He tried to speak, coughed, and winced in pain.

-I feel beaten down.

She laughed, and held it in. But now she knew he wasn't going to die.
José had his eyes fixed on her.
- Crying…?
She knew that beneath his fresh scars, he was smiling. Then she began to speak to him like a boy. She couldn't help but tell him what had happened after the beating, and she didn't apologize for it. She talked and talked, and realized she couldn't stop. She was in a state she had rarely known. She ended up telling him that the old man and Valverde worked closely together: one trying to revive a machine, the other perhaps searching for what remained alive in a corpse. She mentioned that Valverde had told them the soul resides in a place in the brain, like a corpuscle. Was that what he was looking for?
José awoke from his silence:
"Why seek the living among the dead?" he said. "That's what they say Jesus said after he rose again on the third day."
He had trouble speaking, and she gave him a sip of water. He was thin, and she asked him if he was hungry.
- Rats?
Mara laughed. He had heard a lot about everything that had happened on deck.
-Valverde took care of you like a doctor.
"He's more than a doctor," he said, and closed his eyes, tired.
He slept the rest of the day and the next. On Wednesday, the noise of the engine woke him. He looked to one side and saw the river moving and contemplated the shadow of the smoke on the water.
Mara entered the cabin with good news. She was radiant and beautiful for the first time in a long time. Her sullenness and bad temper vanished whenever she was with him. Now she didn't bother him; his body was recovering, and he needed her caresses.
-We're on our way to Corrientes. We'll arrive this weekend, and Valverde will hand over the bodies. We'll have food and water then. We need to take you to the hospital so the doctors can see you.
-I want you to take care of me. I don't need anything else anymore.
-But…
-I don't want to know anything about that…

-You're still afraid they'll come looking for you, I know...but everyone at the hospital knows us and nobody asks questions.
-But they don't know me as part of their group, maybe they know something through my brother.
-They must already be in Buenos Aires waiting to set sail for Europe.
No. They went back north on the Juan Manuel.
- And how do you know?
-They told me the day I went to say goodbye to Carhué.
- And what do you care about them now?
-I have a son, Mara. Or I'm going to have one soon.
She stared at him. She was sitting on the old crate. No, she wasn't going to get angry. He wasn't in the mood for that right now, and besides, she was surprised that he finally told her about his life. José told her, and all she could think about was the pregnant woman. She didn't know if she could have another child, and that seemed so unlikely that suddenly José's son was more than just an idea, it was a reality.
"Do you want it to be ours?" she asked.
Mara undressed and lay down beside him. She kissed him gently, without hurting him or causing him pain.
And suddenly they heard the old man's scream.
- Ship to starboard!
She came out naked onto the deck, the women laughed, and Valverde stood with his arms crossed, watching her. Mara leaned on the railing, her gaze rapt as she watched the immense, motionless ship they were passing. She noticed the lack of activity on deck; no one came out to look at them.
Mara longed to meet Altea. She yearned to see the pregnant woman carrying José's child, and she began to laugh, slapping her one hand against the railing and waving the stump toward the large ship, challenging it. She would have liked to board it and be done with this matter once and for all. She couldn't wait, but she had to. She knew the sky was on her side, the sky from which the persistent flies came, flies that were no longer enemies. That dark, shadowy sky of her childhood when the roofs of houses collapsed.
The women joined them, undressing as well, excited by Mara's wild joy. The sky and the river, vast and wide, were like two mirrors in which they seemed to be reflected, and she even thought she saw that they all had

wings made of flies. They shouted, trying to get the attention of that ship that boasted so proudly of its importance, that took pains to ignore them with its silence, insulting and scorning them, challenging them with the abysmal difference that separated them.
No one, however, came out to observe them.
Neither the screams of a few naked women jumping and laughing like madwomen, nor the strange appearance of the small boat that seemed inhabited by the dying and the insane, and which dragged behind it a boat full of corpses piled one on top of the other, some with their legs and arms hanging flush with the water and forming a murky trail of dirty water, were enough.
And both on the ship and on the boat, the countless and persistent flies continued to swarm, imperishable merchants of death.

6

Natacha covered him with the blanket one of the men had brought her. She hugged him, rubbing his trembling shoulders, thinking it was from the cold, but the January sun was intense and reflected mercilessly on the swirling river. A few caimans were still visible, searching for any remaining trace of the body, and the blood was thinning rapidly. She gazed at the water, but she couldn't yet worry about Ariel; Manuel needed her. That man who had run naked to catch the boy seemed to need her more than ever.
Manuel was crying, trying to cover his face with his hands, trembling and sobbing with a sharp moan that grew hoarse as his throat hurt. Natacha told him to calm down, to please relax because he was going to get sick again. But Manuel dropped to his knees and finally managed to cover his face tightly with his hands, so tightly that she couldn't move them or see the expression on his face. The blanket slipped down his back and she readjusted it.

"Come on, darling, let's go inside..." she said softly, so only he could hear. She glanced sideways at the others, fearing for a moment to reveal any sign of weakness, because she was used to showing her strength in a very different way. She thought she detected confused glances among them. Julio approached and began speaking to Manuel. Between her and Julio, they lifted him up, helping him by the arms and supporting him by the shoulders and waist. The three of them walked toward the cabin. The sunlight then illuminated Manuel's face, and he saw that strange expression that was neither anguish nor pain, but pure terror. When they entered, he saw the blood on the bed and on the floor, and he saw the axe. She stopped, two men took another step forward and looked at her. Manuel knew what she was seeing, and old Julio guessed everything immediately. Manuel was now in their hands; only he could protect him from Natacha's wrath.

She ran to Ariel's lifeless hand, lying on the floor beside the bed. At first, she didn't scream or cry. She took the hand in her own and pressed the lifeless palm against her right cheek. Now she was crying and smiling. Her eyes were open, staring into space. Then she looked up at the crucifix on the wall. She was on her knees, and she crawled down until she was at its foot. She turned around, watching Manuel being laid on the stained bed, the sheets rumpled and sweaty. She crawled, still on her knees, toward the bed.

“Madam, please…” Julio said, trying to help her up. She shook her arms defensively, glaring at him. When she reached the bed, she smelled the sheets, and her face transformed into a kaleidoscope of expressions that followed one another until they blurred into one another, but all bore the unmistakable mark of the martyrs, whose images she had studied throughout her life in the churches of Warsaw and Buenos Aires. Masks of porcelain, ceramic, or wood, where the cracked skin of the cheeks shattered into countless tiny fragments, each containing the essence of the martyr. Open eyes gazing toward some uncertain point in the sky, a sorrowful, melancholic, and above all, pious expression. The martyrs’ hands clasped or parted in prayer, their fingers sometimes broken, and occasionally a hand was missing.

Natacha's face then took on the expression of piety, like that of those virgins covered in a black cloak and a crown of thorns, with tears of blood

on their cheeks. The scent of Ariel on the sheets was all that remained of her son, so she placed his lifeless hand on the bed. She stood up, leaning on the mattress, and refused Julio's help. She began to gather the edges of the sheet and wrapped it around the boy's hand. When it was a bundle, she hugged it to her chest and pressed her face against the fabric.

Manuel lay on the bed, stifling any sobs or noise that might attract her attention. He didn't dare look at her; he didn't even know how to keep his eyes open, because every time he closed them, he saw Ariel's face at the precise moment she lowered the axe. Then he knew she was watching him, and as if beckoning him, he looked up at Natacha.

She stood at the foot of the bed, the rolled-up sheet pressed tightly against her chest, looking like the spitting image of Our Lady of Sorrows. But despite the pious mask she so proudly wore, a swirling turbid wind swirled in her eyes, rising from the center of her irises, growing like a spiral that swept up leaves and dirt. Natacha's gaze was expressionless, clouded by the filth of her thoughts.

Ariel's scent still lingered on the bed, as did some of her pencils scattered across the floor. Manuel felt the fluttering he'd heard before. Was it coming from her, from her eyes, from the whirlwind that dispersed dirt? For a moment, he smelled the jungle, its trees swaying in the wind, all the birds taking flight. And it wasn't daytime, but a dark night where bats flitted from branch to branch.

In that room it was night, but outside the morning was splendidly radiant. Inside, the noise of the wind and the flapping of wings were immense, crashing against the walls with invisible bodies that gave off the acrid smell of excrement. He tried to get up, but only managed to kneel on the bed and clasp his hands in a prayer directed to her, the new Virgin of Sorrows, whose tears were made of mud.

He felt Julio's arms trying to lay him down, but he resisted, asking for forgiveness, even though he had resolved to say nothing, because he knew that any word from him would only be another insult. And when he saw her so calm, observing him with an indulgence that had the whole structure of artifice, he covered his face again with his hands, reciting the Lord's Prayer. When he was halfway through, Natacha's hand touched his head, as if blessing him, and Manuel looked up as he said, "...as we forgive those who trespass against us..." but he didn't manage to say "amen."

The hand was not Natacha's.
She had unwrapped the dead hand and placed it on her head.

The ship didn't move all day. The men wandered around the deck, some waiting for orders, others drinking, and by nightfall they were all drunk. They had seen Natacha leave Manuel's cabin with a rolled-up, blood-stained sheet, her head bowed, and some even thought they saw her walking down the corridor toward her room, kissing the sheet. Others said that Manuel had been in bed since noon, with a fever.
During the afternoon they heard him shouting, and when someone knocked on the door to ask, or simply to wait for orders, Julio would open the door and look at them with contempt.
"What do you want?" he asked. The one who had knocked tried to see inside the cabin, but only saw a light next to the bed. Manuel was lying there, tossing and turning, throwing off the blankets and sheets, sweating and groaning. He kept shaking his hair.
Is there anything we can do?
Two other men were standing behind by the door, also peeking into what was happening inside.
-Nothing, just wait and do your usual job.
- But when will the captain return...?
"How should I know!" said Julio, and slammed the door.
She returned to the bedside and sat in the chair where she had spent the entire afternoon. She wiped the sick man's sweat, re-covered him each time he kicked off the covers, and tried to prevent him from hurting himself. Manuel shook his arms and hit his face, but always with his eyes closed, as if trying to dislodge something from his mind and unable to coordinate his movements. She had seen him ill a few weeks before, but now he was worse, and on both occasions it had been after contact with Natacha. The first time, when they greeted each other, she had seen him shudder, even though she had then devoted herself to caring for him; and then now, when, after she removed and rewrapped the lifeless hand in the sheet, he lost consciousness, and since then he had done nothing but have nightmares, scream, and sweat.
He made him drink as much water as he could, holding his back against the wall, opening his mouth with one hand and pouring it in with the other.

Manuel thrashed about, spilling almost all the liquid. He couldn't stand any fabric on him; his skin burned, and he could only tolerate the cold compresses that Julio had cut from an old silk shirt of Captain Mendoza's. Julio knew what was happening to him. It wasn't a physical ailment, but rather his soul devouring itself. Was the soul located somewhere in the mind? What was the mind, merely the space occupied by the skull, or did it encompass all of a man's functionality, his body and his consciousness? He had read extensively about it as a student, but then his body and its diseases consumed all the time of his surgeon's hands. Too much to bear, and so he became a useless drunkard, good only for treating prostitutes when ashore, and when he grew tired of them, only for setting sailors' broken bones and stitching their wounds. Only Mendoza had trusted him, just as he had trusted Tomasa, the old slave. Mendoza gathered the refuse: men and women who would have starved to death in some village pigsty, assembled on a ship that was also old and declared unusable until he rescued it from the shipyard where it lay abandoned.

Julio wouldn't abandon the sick man, because Manuel was a guest of the man who had rescued him from the rats. That's what he was when Mendoza found him in Paraná, a beggar who had once been a surgeon, lying among bottles with rats swarming around the room that must have been his burial niche. Julio Ruiz, a surgeon who had graduated with honors from the Sorbonne and was the only foreign student Charcot had accepted at La Salpêtrière, had forgotten half of what he had learned when he was appointed ship's doctor and second-in-command of a ship that had belonged to Napoleon's fleet. What was the meaning of all this retrieval of the past that Mendoza had so painstakingly undertaken? It was as if he wanted to rescue his own lineage, now forever dead. And into this charade he had brought a wife as foreign as she was strange, and a son who, no matter how much anyone tried to deny it, wasn't his.

But when Julio Ruiz used his hands again, he realized they remembered what they had touched: dead and living bodies, pustules and blood, bones and wounded flesh. They had silenced many screams and felt bites, they had suffered like his eyes after hours searching inside bodies for the causes of death. And in that work, he regained his self-confidence.

That's why he wouldn't abandon Manuel, no matter what he had done. It wasn't his place to judge him; that was the captain's wife's job.

*

Natacha left the cabin and walked down the corridor with her head bowed. Her lips touched the rolled-up sheet. Her hair was tied back, but several strands had come loose and covered part of her face. The black dress was dirty and torn at the bottom of the skirt. As she walked, barely looking ahead, as if her eyelids were closed, the torn fabric trailed along the wooden floor, gathering dust and shadows. Natacha's figure was like a shadow moving within another shadow, the interior of the corridor, hidden from the midday sun. Her silhouette was only visible through the faint, dull glow of the sheet held against her body as if it were a relic.

That was now Ariel's hand.

She went into her room, closed the door, and sat on the bed. She relaxed her arms and placed the sheet over her lap. She unwrapped it slowly, but the sheet was large, and her hand fell to the floor. Natacha let out a guttural cry, very low, a moan really. She picked it up and carried it to the cabinet where the images of saints and virgins were kept, right under the crucifix that hung on the wall. She carefully moved aside the clay and ceramic figures she had acquired in Santa Fe and Buenos Aires. Some were made by the indigenous people, but Máximo had brought them to her because he knew how she liked them. They were the only thing she and her husband had shared, moments of peace in which she, even knowing he did it to please her, accepted them as a communion between them. The rest of the time had been arguments and silence, and this silence was the most painful aspect of their marriage.

She rested her lifeless, bloodstained hand, which she would never wash, on the table and saw the porcelain statuette she had brought from Warsaw. It was an image of the Virgin of Czestochowa, the Black Madonna who shows everyone their path. And that was why it was almost the only thing she could salvage from her home in Poland and bring to America when she

married Máximo. The symbolism might be controversial, she told herself many times, as she held the figurine in her hands and touched it, but somehow it had marked the path to this land she so detested, yet had stubbornly come to love because its inhabitants resembled the Virgin so much. The very sallow color of their skin was more than a symbol; it was evidence that she, Natacha Krakovsky, was meant to be there, in a land of jungle and river, among uncultured men and women who knew nothing but hunting and procreation. A land where the cities were a poor imitation of Europe and where the most civilized were only capable of writing pamphlets and bad verses. There Ariel was born, blond and with skin as white as milk. She had said to herself, when she saw him in the cradle next to her bed the day he was born, that he was like an angel. The farmhands and maids who worked on the Santa Fe farm had said the same.
And her white hand, paler now than ever despite the dirt, rested from then on on that piece of furniture so that she could pray to it, and she placed the image of the Virgin beside it. She knelt and clasped her hands, but as she was very tired, she rested them on the edge of the furniture and laid her head upon them. She thought she was falling asleep, but it didn't matter, because that way it was easier for her to remember the house in Warsaw where she lived with her father.

Old Alexei Krakovsky was a handsome man, that's how she always saw him, and besides, everyone in town said so: the governess who looked after her, the ladies who came to visit him on Saturday evenings. Natacha was fifteen when she began to preside over those gatherings, which took place upstairs in the Warsaw house during the winter and at the country house outside during the summer. It was around that time that the Cossack revolts began, and she had heard, amidst the rustling of dresses and the violin and seal music that filled those evenings, the hushed protests and sullen faces of the men who formed the circle around her father. But he had decided to ignore those revolts; after all, there had always been and always would be revolutions because the Polish people were never content with anything, and his family and his estate had always survived. That was the end of his argument, and none of the others dared contradict him, no matter how much they frowned. That's why the evenings always ended well, with the two of them standing by the door, bidding farewell to each of

their guests, like husband and wife. That's what they came to be, in the superficial sense that others formed of them. "Alexei and his wife..." the women would say, and then quickly correct themselves with a smile that showed anything but kindness: "Alexei and his daughter."

At fifteen, Natacha had come to occupy the place her mother would have held at those society gatherings, had she not died five years after Natacha's birth. Now that she was grown, she remembered little of her mother, only a few tones of her voice when she sang lullabies, or the scent of her hair when they embraced. She couldn't even recall her face clearly. Everything she knew about her had been told to her by her father and the wet nurse who had cared for her since her death. "She was a weak woman," her father said. "She was a doll who liked to play with dolls," the wet nurse said. Natacha never asked any more questions, because she didn't need to. She was the lady of the house, and although she officially assumed that title upon turning fifteen, she had always been its mistress. The servants took great care of her, and she knew that her father was behind all that attention.

She remembered, yes, that she slept with her mother every night. And thinking back, she sometimes thought she could recall seeing her awake, staring into the darkness of the room, sometimes trembling, sometimes talking to herself, or humming a tune. When her mother died, that night they left her alone in the room she had been given since birth, where she played and received lessons, but where she had hardly slept.

She was five years old, or so they told her, but she could always remember with certainty the moment the nurse turned off the light and closed the door. The feeling of loneliness was so intense, it was more like falling into a void. She laid her head on the pillow and felt herself sinking as her arms tried to grasp something that wasn't there. And when the vertigo stopped, only because she forced herself to open her eyes, she screamed and cried, calling for her father. The maid arrived first and tried to comfort her, but it was when Alexei appeared in the doorway, his blond hair disheveled, his torso bare, wearing long underpants, that she saw him and called out to him.

Her father picked her up and carried her to her room. She had almost no memory of what happened that night; she had fallen asleep the moment he laid her on the bed and covered her with the blanket. When she awoke, her

father was gone, but she could still feel the warmth of his body in the sheets. She looked around the room, so different from her mother's. The walls were covered in dark-colored, geometric patterns. Next to the window, there was a desk piled high with papers and folders, an inkwell, and a lamp. Many books lined the walls on tall, expansive shelves. An armchair sat beside a bedside table. The room had a sober feel, though she hadn't thought of it that way at the time, but she liked it nonetheless. Everything in the room conveyed a sense of security: the light came in just the right amount, illuminating the books and the desk; the bed was close, yet it didn't detract from the idea of study and contemplation. Somehow, even back then she knew what she discovered much later, when she learned to read and began to explore those books, climbing onto a chair, taking them off the shelves and leafing through them first, then reading the first few pages, and then, sitting on the floor, going through them one after another until the end.

But those books that particularly captivated her were the ones with images of saints and virgins. In her explorations, she had come across books on botany, astronomy, and zoology. All were filled with countless illustrations, but even the depictions of exotic animals didn't hold her attention for long. Again and again, she returned to religious books. Not the Bible, but the hagiographies and the lives of the saints. She read Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas, in translations or in Latin, because her father had allowed it. But what truly drew her in were the stories of the martyrs. She would read over and over the accounts of imprisonments and flagellations, deaths at the stake, and dismemberments, eagerly searching for the illustrations on the following pages. When she couldn't find them, she would stare blankly at the top of the book and imagine them.

The nurse and governess tried to persuade her to go out to the park and play with other children, but no matter how hard she tried to obey, she would return to her room when no one was watching her. They would tell her father what was happening, and he would come and see her. He would sit beside her on the floor, gently take the book from her hands, and close it, marking the page with a quill or simply a piece of cloth, because that was what he did with his own books.

-The good thing about books, Nati, is that they don't get offended if you make them wait, and they'll always be here.

He held her tightly; she remembered that so well because there were times when she felt so oppressed she couldn't breathe, but it was just a silly idea, because what she actually felt in those moments was what she later called ecstasy. She had found the word in a book of saints that described the flagellations of some saints as moments of spiritual ecstasy. The body in communion with the spirit—those were the moments when God and humankind were one, and that was why Jesus had suffered such torments. Yes, her father was like a deity: strong, with warm skin, and handsome like a Scandinavian god. And in such moments, when he felt embraced to the point where his heart raced and fear grew, she experienced the closest thing she could to what the saints had felt: the ecstasy of impending death, and then the relief, which was almost a resignation.

For the next ten years, she continued to sleep in her father's bed. Her own room had become a kind of study, where she had some of Alexei's books brought in, along with others that her friends gave her. She had few books of her own, because the girls her age avoided her, considering her strange. But this very feeling excited the boys' curiosity, who saw in her a kind of friend with whom they could talk about serious things and at the same time make suggestive, almost sensual, words. When they went to visit her in her room, no one stopped them, and neither guilt nor resentment arose between them. The bed was always made, against a wall, and they would talk, and sometimes even dance around the desk, to the rhythm of a flute that one of them always brought and played.

The women of the house frowned upon the habit of sleeping in their father's bed, but they rarely dared to say so. Alexei laughed at them, and looking at Natacha, they both smiled at the women's naiveté.

One morning, Natacha woke up startled. The sinking feeling she'd had the night after her mother died had returned that morning. When she opened her eyes, Alexei was lying on his back. She gazed at her father's skin and reached out to touch him, then saw that his palm was stained with blood. She pulled back the sheets and stared at the red stains. Then she wept, because she had learned not to scream or complain unnecessarily. Alexei turned over and knew what was happening.

All day she stayed in her own room. She listened to the women's footsteps outside the door. Sometimes they knocked and asked something. When it was time for dinner, her father came in. She was in her armchair, a book in

her hands. He squatted down beside her and turned the cover to read the title: "The Circulation of the Blood" by William Harvey. He was silent and sat on the armrest. His right hip rested almost on Natacha's left shoulder; she was twelve years old at the time. He placed his strong hand on his daughter's dark-haired head. The contrast of tones stood out in the growing gloom of the room: the blond hair on the back of his hand and his daughter's black hair.

They were complementary, not contradictory.

He decided to ignore the women, who had been bothering him all day, telling him that the girl shouldn't sleep with her father anymore. And as if she had read his mind, he heard her clear, calm voice, but with a hint of anguish.

-They're not going to let me sleep in your room anymore, are they?

"What do they know about what goes on between us? What could they possibly understand?" he replied.

That night she would stay there, and the women kept quiet all the next day. But the room was so cold and filled with memories of the day that she couldn't fall asleep. The room seethed with the sounds of music and lyrics, and the voices in the books spoke at the same time. She sat up in bed, covering her ears, then her eyes, then her ears again, and so on. When she felt cold, she rubbed her arms, but she didn't try to lie down and pull the covers over her. She was so used to human warmth at night that the solitude of her bed was the opposite of ecstasy: it was like sinking into a bottomless pit. Then she got up, went out into the hallway, and entered her father's room, which had always been hers as well. She sat down on the bed. He was asleep, but soon he opened his eyes and looked at her. His face was smiling, and his mouth was saying something like "my child" or "my little one," but she knew that perhaps she was imagining it. The shadow of night prevented her from seeing her father's face, but it did allow her to feel the strength of his hand as he caressed her, and the scent of his body, a soft tangle of blond hair. She lay down beside him, as always, and felt Alexei's breath, and the brush of his beard against her cheek. And for a moment she thought she was dying, because the weight of the world was upon her. If she had died, she never knew, because when morning came, Natasha Krakovsky had been reborn.

The winter after she turned fifteen, Natacha looked almost like a married woman. Anyone who didn't know her and saw her casually strolling through the streets of Warsaw would have thought she was perhaps eighteen or nineteen years old, browsing the shops on Main Street for a dress for her upcoming wedding. But that winter, the streets were different from other years. The snow had fallen earlier than usual, and layer upon layer was creating a thick layer of ice on the cobblestones. Walking was difficult, especially because children and teenagers were running around, trying to hear the news coming from the outskirts. Few women dared to go shopping, and even fewer went for a walk at that time of day, when night was falling. But it was precisely at that hour that the carts arrived from the countryside, and the men would approach to find out what was new about the revolution.

When she arrived home, several men were at the door. Many were her father's regular friends; others she had never seen before. Her arrival interrupted disjointed conversations, their words mingling with greetings and bows toward Miss Natacha, who, asking permission, made her way through the suited figures of those young and old men of the city. Entering the foyer, she saw several others conversing, smoking their pipes. They greeted her again, and she felt their eyes on her back as she continued walking toward her father's room. She knew he must be there with his closest friends, surely discussing the latest news. She stopped in the doorway and couldn't help but listen; they were speaking loudly, sometimes shouting angrily, out of rage or helplessness. She could almost imagine their movements, because she had seen them almost every week at the Saturday evening gatherings, and she knew how they reacted to an insult or simply to a political opinion or a comment about the latest play they had seen at the theater.

The Cossacks had taken over almost all the ranches and farms in the region. They had killed the laborers and were living in the houses, raping the maids and killing the livestock.

He heard his father's voice, unyielding, refusing to leave Warsaw. He had worked his whole life for what he had, and he wasn't about to abandon it. He urged them to fight against the revolution, but they were all just city men, and the rest were landowners who knew nothing of weapons. The long peace and abundance they had enjoyed, he heard his father say, had

lulled them into complacency, and that complacency had turned into indolence.
"My daughter has more courage than you all!" she said.
Natacha jumped, looking around. Those nearby had heard. Inside, silence fell. Those who had been arguing were surely exchanging knowing glances, but they wouldn't answer Alexei Krakovsky. They knew his temper, and it wouldn't surprise them to see him one day grab a shotgun and go out into the street shooting at Cossacks.
Natasha went to her room. She heard footsteps and men's voices until very late. After dinner, her old nurse came in to help her change for bed and gave her the bad news: the Krakovsky estate was in the hands of the Cossacks. They had killed several men and burned the stable. They were said to be living in the house, eating the cattle they slaughtered, and waiting.
"What are you waiting for?" Natacha asked.
The old woman shrugged, and as she left she bumped into Alexei.
"They expect the rest of the Polish people to join them," the father said.
"Will they come to overthrow the king?" she asked, but she already knew the answer.

For the next month, her father went back and forth from the fields, but according to him, he hadn't been able to get onto his land. Everything was still; there were no gunshots and no fires. Alexei still hoped the army would rise up in support of the king and wage war against the Cossacks. But Natacha had overheard her father's friends, who came over every night and talked over pipe smoke and glasses of vodka, saying that the army was afraid of the people.
The first day of spring had barely arrived; the thaw had yet to begin. Winter lingered, but the Saturday evenings continued. They were the only family who maintained their traditions. The townspeople criticized Krakovsky's stubbornness. Many had abandoned their properties; others still hesitated to leave everything behind. And in that first month of that precarious spring, the gatherings continued with only a few changes. There was no more music, but food was plentiful. There were fewer women, but this gave the men an opportunity to express themselves more crudely, gesticulating wildly or speaking with certain obscenities that didn't bother

Natacha, by then the undisputed hostess. They knew she was different, and they had seen her approving gaze as she listened to them. She endured the smoke from the pipes and cigars, even tolerating the way some, slightly drunk, discreetly placed a hand on her shoulder. Natacha pretended not to notice, and gently moved away so as not to offend him.
Some foreigners had arrived, and one Saturday they introduced her to a tall young man with dark, curly hair, fair skin, and almost black eyes. He came from America, from Argentina, and his name was Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza. They shook hands, and she noticed the fascination he had stirred in her eyes. Mendoza spoke fluent French, and they communicated easily. Sometimes they separated to talk with another guest, but they soon reunited. Krakovsky was also drawn to Mendoza. He had taken his hand and shoulder to greet him warmly. He was extremely pleased to see such a cultured visitor from afar. He knew that the Argentine pampas were not the wild places he heard about or read about in the newspapers. Mendoza confirmed this, but said that outside of Buenos Aires, the situation in the towns was very difficult. Indian raids were relentless, and the caudillos were constantly inciting the population to revolt.
"Captain," said Krakovsky. "Are you describing your country or mine?"

The following month, the thaw began. The sky remained clear day after day, and the sun streamed through the windows of the house without its suffocating glare on the snow. Natacha continued to receive Mendoza on Saturdays. He arrived before the evening gatherings and stayed for an hour or two after they ended. Krakaovsky didn't object to this relationship; on the contrary, he was delighted to see the captain and greeted him warmly, embracing him, encouraging him to smoke his pipe and abandon his prudish attitude when it came to alcohol. Mendoza would then sit down, and the two would converse while Natacha listened, observing them with apparent peace. But something had been bothering her for several days, and although she sensed the reason, something else prevented her from acknowledging it, her thoughts wandering in directions unrelated to the true explanation. She would get up to look for a forgotten plate or a new glass, and when she returned to the room the men would see her distracted, wandering unnecessarily around the armchairs, or feeding the hearth fire when it was no longer needed.

"What's wrong with him, Natacha?" Mendoza asked. "He's like one of my dogs, pacing around and around before settling down."
Krakovsky began to laugh. He put down his pipe and went over to Mendoza to hug him. Natacha noticed he was passably drunk, just like the last two months. Events worried him, and he knew that part of his fortune was already lost forever. They had heard that the king was going to abdicate to prevent the people from rising up. But what the king doesn't know, Krakovsky had said, is that the people like to kill, and that before building, they prefer to destroy.
Natacha accompanied her father to his room and returned to the living room where Mendoza was waiting for him. Seated facing each other in two armchairs, they leaned towards one another.
"I know you're worried about your family's situation, Natacha. There are some very alarming rumors. I'd like to tell you..."
Natacha sensed abrupt changes in her life, and she was afraid. She thought she knew what Mendoza would ask of her, but she kept thinking of her father and herself.
-I can't abandon my father, especially not now, of course.
Mendoza leaned back in his chair, sighing.
"I have no commitments to my family until Christmas, and I can wait," he said.
Natacha went to bed next to her father. Krakovsky had fallen asleep fully dressed. She took off his boots and jacket. She unbuttoned his shirt, and then lay down beside him. She couldn't abandon him, especially not now, as she had told Mendoza. But they had both understood different situations. She was referring to the son who had begun to live.
The following Saturday, almost at midnight, the gathering was limited to the three of them and two of Alexei's friends. The old wet nurse and the deaf-mute cook were the only ones left in the house. Around midnight, shouts were heard in the street, growing rapidly louder, and the fire engine bells began to ring shrilly. Natasha heard the church bells and thought she was the only one who had noticed them. She ran to her room and searched the bottom drawer. She grabbed the image of the Virgin of Czetchowa, wrapped it in a handkerchief, and hid it under her dress. She heard a gunshot. She knew now that this was the only thing she could take with her from Poland, and when she entered the living room, the faces of the men

who had come in confirmed it. There were at least a dozen Cossacks with firearms and daggers, dressed in winter clothes, scarves, and threadbare hats. They were shouting, but nothing they said was understandable. Krakovsky and the others had been thrown to the ground. Natacha looked for her father and saw him face down. The Cossacks grabbed Natacha. Mendoza tried to get up, but couldn't. The other two were still, perhaps dead. The Cossacks ransacked the house, overturning the furniture, looking for food, clothing, and money. They found all of it, but before leaving, they fired two shots. Natacha didn't see who they shot; they had tied her to a chair and blindfolded her. When she heard the silence in the house, she knew the Virgin had helped her. She would tell her father this, the one who had so often scolded her for this devotion, which he found incomprehensible. Only the wet nurse shared this custom with her, and she had taken advantage of the old woman's ignorance to do it without her father noticing. Natacha hadn't had time to pray; she had only touched the statue, and she felt rewarded.

"Father!" he shouted blindly. "Maximus!"

But no one answered her, only the bells of the nearby church continued to toll. To whom: the people or the victims of the people? But Jesus had been one of the people; he couldn't be against them. She told herself that if in the darkness there was nothing—no house, no clothes, no wealth—and that devotion and feeling still remained, and above all, the child she was carrying, nothing more was needed. She smelled the smoke from the fires that had started in the city. And she cried out again:

"Carlota!" he called to the wet nurse, but she had surely fled or was dead. The cook was probably still asleep in her undisturbed private world. Then he heard a groan. It was Máximo Mendoza's voice.

"Maximo!" he called.

She heard the movement of a body moving across the floor. Natacha tried to move the chair until it fell to the floor, and rubbing her face against the ground, she managed to remove the blindfold, and saw her father's body beside her.

She called to him, but she couldn't touch him. Máximo was behind her, untying the ropes from her hands. Then he lifted her up and hugged her. Natacha was crying.

“He was the first one they killed,” Mendoza said, hugging her like Krakovsky had. “When they came in, he stood right in front of them with his shotgun. They asked him who lived here. ‘Count Alexei Krakovsky and Countess Natacha,’ he answered. I swear your father was smiling, proud. Can you imagine saying that in front of those men? My God, what a courageous man, I’d never seen anything like it.”
Máximo Mendoza had said all that mixing Spanish and French. He trembled as he spoke, and he trembled as he embraced Natacha, who buried her face in his blood-stained shirt. They stayed like that for a long time. The night would be long, and they knew they had been spared death. Fear, however, was hard to kill, and their embrace was a safer refuge than the walls of the house.

The next day, Krakovsky's friends were picked up by their families, and Alexei was hastily buried in the family plot in a simple, unadorned coffin that Mendoza and Natacha had managed to obtain after searching all over the city. Funeral homes were overwhelmed, and there were no coffins available. The Krakovskys' horses and carriage had been stolen. That night, they sat in the middle of the still-devastated living room.
-We have to go, Natacha…
She had returned from the cemetery in silence, her head bowed, clutching the statuette of the Virgin Mary. They had both walked behind the coffin, their eyes fixed on the ground. Mendoza had placed his arm around Natacha's shoulders and felt her stifled sobs. He wondered how long she could hold back like this. At some point, she would have to cry. But she seemed to be containing all her strength in the hands that held the statue of the Virgin.
"Come on, my dear... you must be reasonable. Nothing ties you to this city anymore. I'll take you back to my homeland, we'll start a new life. You'll forget everything..."
Natacha was sitting, as usual, in the armchair in her father's room. Máximo had squatted down, as Krakovsly often did, and was stroking her shoulders. When Natacha didn't respond, he lowered his hand and placed it on one of her knees. She then looked up at him. He didn't know how to define that look. Later he would remember that it was the first time he had seen her. In Natacha's eyes there was anger and resignation, resentment and

remorse. There was no love, at least not as he had understood it in his short life and experience of romance, sex, or whatever it was, in what he considered the naive Buenos Aires of that time, after having seen and learned what he had gone to see and learn in Europe, like any young man from a good family.

He never saw love in Natacha's eyes, but there was something much greater than simple, and perhaps overrated, love. Something indefinable that, nevertheless, overwhelmed him like an intense summer storm on the pampas. Wind and dust, day after day.

She kissed him in a way that was very different from how she had kissed his father. Mendoza received that kiss, and he knew it was very different from any kiss he had ever received from any woman, much less one who was almost sixteen. They slept in the dead man's bed, but there was no occasion for either of them to think about that. The pain was pleasure, and the pleasure a self-reinforcing satisfaction.

Before dawn, Mendoza pulled back the sheet and got up. She was still asleep, or so it seemed. During the night, he had learned to see Natacha's many facets. What she showed wasn't always false, and what she hid wasn't always the truth. But it would take him a long time to distinguish between them, and he wondered if he would have enough years to do so. Because he knew he was already bound to her; sex and their souls demanded it. If she wanted to hide certain aspects of herself, let her. Natacha's body was a precious relic, and her mind a porcelain labyrinth.

At midday, while they were having lunch, he proposed to her. The cook served them, silent and impassive, seemingly blind to anything but cooking. Was she like an intelligent dog? Mendoza wondered, for he knew about greyhounds because he bred them. No, not even that. Perhaps something more artificially complex, like a machine. He didn't even know her name.

"We never knew," Natacha told him. "And we never called her, of course. We have to go find her and write everything down for her. I taught her to read."

Maximo placed his hand on hers, both resting next to a cup of coffee.

-A tricky task, I imagine. But you didn't answer my question.

She rejected him. Appearances didn't matter, she told him; they would soon be traveling. And that was that. During the afternoon, Mendoza sat at Krakovsy's desk and wrote several letters. Before six o'clock, he went to

the post office. Upon returning, he described the state of the city. Half of the houses that were still standing were empty and looted. The blocks in the southern part of town had been razed by fire. Many businesses remained open, and the post office was under guard. They said the king was still considering abdication, but by then he was no longer a king but a prisoner in his own palace.

Before going to bed, Máximo spread a map on the bed and showed her the itinerary they would take the next day. Natacha watched the finger pointing to the route on the paper, but her eyes followed the outline of Mendoza's hand and arm, then his shoulder and bare torso. The fair skin and dark hair created a contrast in which she found a contradiction that excited her, like cold and heat, or pain and pleasure.

They would travel overland to Hamburg, and then take a ship to America. Natacha asked him if the men in his country were like him, and he played along, replying that only he was like that, and leaned in to kiss her, but she stopped him and asked him something in Spanish. He was surprised, and Natacha told him she had been reading some books.

“At this rate, you’ll be speaking perfectly by the time we get there,” he said, moving closer again, but she jumped up excitedly, like a child discovering a new game, and went to find some books. She scattered them on the bed and asked him to teach her to pronounce words correctly. Máximo resigned himself to spending the night like that. There were novels by Quevedo and poems by Góngora, but he found Sarmiento’s *Facundo* . Krakovsky was a remarkable man, no doubt, he told himself. He opened the book and began to read. Natacha listened, sitting on the bed with her legs crossed and her eyes fixed on Máximo’s lips. She desired them, but she longed even more to learn.

The journey lasted almost forty days. Their travel through Polish land was slow, driven by a desire to avoid the roads where they knew the Cossacks traveled back and forth. At the border, there were many revolutionaries trying to prevent the escape of those they called wealthy bourgeois. But even though Mendoza and Natacha carried nothing more than clothes, a few books belonging to old Krakovsky that his daughter didn't want to leave behind, and a few reliquaries, like the one of the Virgin of Czechoswa, they knew that despite this, they wouldn't be allowed to pass if

they were found. So Mendoza, driving the two-horse cart with Natacha beside him like a middle-class wife, veered off the main road and sought out alternative paths. He didn't know such regions, but Natacha guided him, as she was accustomed to riding long distances when she was on vacation at the farm. The muleteers used to accompany her when she was still a child, and when she was older they only had to go looking for her a couple of times, finding her back riding tired but smiling towards her father's house.

"You must have been a rebellious girl," Mendoza said, his eyes fixed on the surroundings and his hands on the reins.

"Only because I did what I wanted, but not like the others. I like horses and dogs, and books, of course." Then she bent down and clutched her head.

- What's happening?

-Nothing, just a little dizzy.

They continued their journey along narrow paths, between trees and rocks. They managed to evade the Cossack bands and cross the border. Their arrival at the port of Hamburg took only a few days. With a week still to go before their departure, they stayed in a poor boarding house to avoid attracting attention. News of the Polish rebellion had spread by word of mouth, and terror was the only certainty, according to what they heard. People regarded them with suspicion, and the few who dared to ask them anything distrusted their word.

The following Sunday they boarded the ship and set sail. The ship was named *Frederick II* ; it was old and enormous, and it carried many emigrants. Of the three masts, only one had its sails unfurled as they sailed up the Elbe. When they reached the North Sea, Natasha leaned over the deck and rested against the railing.

- Are we in the ocean yet?

Mendoza stood behind her and hugged her, resting his head on one of her shoulders. They both gazed at the shoreless sea.

-Not yet.

The ship stopped at several smaller ports, then Ems, and finally Amsterdam, where it took three days to load goods and more emigrants. Many were Polish, but each group distrusted the others and kept to themselves.

Leaving Amsterdam, they soon entered the English Channel and made their final stop in Le Havre. Natacha witnessed the arrogant and indifferent way the French treated the emigrants. During the day they were anchored in the port, Mendoza told her he would go ashore to see if he could find any friends. Máximo spoke French as well as his native Spanish, but Natacha harbored resentment toward the French.

"I'll wait for you," he told her.

Mendoza went ashore, and she watched him disappear into the crowd—the dockworkers, the sailors, and the merchants. She went into her cabin, a room barely big enough for the bed they shared. She began to pray before the image of the Virgin she had placed on the floor. Then she took a book from the trunk, opened it, and began to read the medical text she had brought. She felt nauseous and feared that the long voyage would reveal her condition to Mendoza before they reached Buenos Aires. She had to marry him, and she longed to, but her pride compelled her to wait, to postpone her desire and her need. She had to maintain the image of her aristocracy, but above all, she was afraid of what her father's spirit might reveal. Because since his death, she believed that what she had been able to hide from him before was now impossible. Alexei's spirit was everywhere, in the land they had left behind and in the sea on which they had embarked on their journey. And in that vast ocean, Krakovsky's soul was perhaps as big as the sea itself. How could she hide so that he wouldn't see her marrying Mendoza? It was true that this was what the old man would have wanted, but it was she who now refused to allow herself to leave him. The old man's body was buried in Poland, but part of him remained in Natacha's body, and from there he spoke to her, and she was terrified that in the open sea that fragment of his body would recover the soul that wandered everywhere, searching for something to cling to.

For a moment, she imagined her family as the Holy Family: God-Krakovsky, Joseph-Mendoza, Natasha-Mary. And the still-unnamed son she wouldn't dare call Jesus. She closed her eyes on the book and slapped her cheek. She must never allow such thoughts again.

That night Mendoza returned with a friend. He called her to come out on deck, and she greeted a short, gray-haired man who must have been over fifty years old.

-Natacha, this is my friend Alberdi, a diplomat to France for my country.

The old man was thin, but with strong hands, and he kissed Natacha's hand.
-It won't be for much longer, the government isn't making things easy for me.
Maximum river.
"It is you, my friend, who has your own ideas and intends to do what you think is right. That is why I respect you much more than those who are over there."
Alberdi insisted on accompanying them to the cabin; the commotion on deck made it impossible to speak amidst the cacophony of so many languages shouted out.
Natacha and the guest sat on the bed, and although he tried to refuse, Máximo sat on the floor. They began to talk about Argentina, partly in French and mostly in Spanish. Natacha refused to have anything translated for her; she wanted to learn. That's how she learned something about Buenos Aires and the provinces, about the governments and Alberdi's long exile, about a great war against Paraguay. She listened to the old man's opinions about men she didn't know, but when she heard Sarmiento's name, she took out the book from which she had learned some Spanish. The man took it in his hands, frowned, but they both realized it was just an act, a feigned expression of disdain.
"Always the same catchphrase that serves as his introduction all over the world," he said, and left the book on the bed.
-I have to go, friends. I have to get up early tomorrow; the early hours are the only ones that allow me to work more rested.
They saw him off on deck, well after midnight. The bridge was deserted, and they watched him disappear over French soil.
"He's a remarkable man," she said.
Maximo took her by the waist and smiled.
-It's a living relic, it seems to me.

The ocean was so vast that she had the strange sensation of feeling utterly lost and adrift in something that was the closest thing to nothingness she had ever imagined. She hadn't imagined such immensity, no matter how much she had read about it in books. The sky seemed heavier than the land, because the water merged with it, and both were a single entity that

seemed to have no end. She sat in a chair, apart from everyone, dressed in black like a widow, and that's what everyone would have thought if they hadn't seen the man who usually accompanied her. Her pale complexion and dark hair made her seem strange and odd to the others, who only had eyes and attention for daily meals and games to fill their leisure time. At first, she tried to stay in the cabin, but the shame of behaving like a child made her go out and sit down with a book in her hands, raising her eyes to look at the surface of the sea, as if searching for something. When she was sure that the water would speak to her only with its monotonous certainty, and that the sky was not made of stone but an emptiness, she scoffed at her fears and joined Maximus when he sat with other families to talk or walk on deck.

But every day during those weeks was the same; not a single storm even came close to the countless tales she'd heard from men and women during those unbearably hot afternoons. They were approaching the tropics, and the cold Polish winter was turning into a hot, sweltering summer. She perspired and undid the top button of her blouse to dry herself with a handkerchief, which she immediately tucked into her fist. Maximus was in his shirtsleeves, but she'd seen crew members and passengers with their torsos bare, fishing rods sticking out over the side. Maximus joined them, and Natasha resigned herself to staying and listening to the women's insipid chatter, obliged to answer them now and then, until they stopped asking her questions, and she was then free to think or read. Sometimes, a woman would ask her about the pregnancy. She was surprised at first, then she was no longer astonished that these women, whose sole purpose was to bear children, noticed. They would exchange a few words that no one else would ever hear, then the other would walk away as if they had never spoken. This woman, who, without having read a book in her entire life, seemed to know everything there was to know. But the land wasn't the sea, nor was this ship the ranch where she would go to live with Máximo Mendoza. Knowledge was grounded in intuition, and intuition was shaped by place and time. She believed what she read in books, and doubt led her from one to another, and when she could find no more answers, she had her images and a crucifix, her anchor wherever she was.

When they arrived at the port of Buenos Aires, Natacha was thin and emaciated; she had vomited almost every bite she had eaten in the last ten days, since they had set sail from their last stop in Rio de Janeiro. During that voyage, the sea was almost always choppy and windy. Rainy nights alternated with hot days. The general mood was bad, and the crew was eager to arrive and get rid of the passengers.

Natacha got off the ship and discovered that Buenos Aires was still like a village. There were nothing but houses that looked like they were made of adobe in almost deserted blocks surrounded by muddy streets in which horses sank their hooves.

Maximo saw the look of disappointment on her face.

-It's not always like this. It's just the rain these days…

He didn't ask why they didn't pave the streets. As they rode in the rented sulky, which rattled over potholes and puddles, he saw the mud sidewalks and the adobe or red brick walls, with windows holding flowerpots and through which he could see large, empty courtyards. They arrived at a boarding house, and the landlady came out to greet them.

"My little Máximo!" she said, hugging him. She was an elderly matron with abundant hair held back with an old comb with broken teeth.

"Natacha, this is Doña Elvira," she said, introducing them. "She was my wet nurse here in Buenos Aires when I spent my winters here."

The woman greeted her with a kiss that started out enthusiastically, but suddenly stopped and looked at her mischievously.

"So that's how it is!" she said to Mendoza, patting his cheek with affectionate roughness, and he didn't seem to quite understand. He went to the sulky to lower the trunk, but Máximo wouldn't allow it. When their hands met on the handle, she leaned close to his ear: "Good job," she said. He understood then. Doña Elvira returned to where Natacha was and took her arm. The three of them entered the colonial mansion, and four dogs greeted them barking and wagging their tails.

- Out with the dogs, out!

The old woman tried to shoo them away, but they just laughed. Natacha felt comfortable with them; they respected her. The old woman stood with her arms crossed, watching as the four dogs sat around Natacha, waiting for a pat, but not demanding one.

"Look here, my dear! You should have come earlier to raise them. They make my blood boil!"
Mendoza was used to dogs, which were the topic of conversation during dinner. The old woman had no other pensioners besides the two of them.
"These are tough times, kid. I'm stuck keeping this house afloat on my own. Tomasa comes to help sometimes, but she spends more time chatting than cleaning. And your aunts want everything spotless so they can come back and show off their fancy airs in Buenos Aires whenever they feel like it."
Máximo couldn't stop laughing at the cheeky and sincere way she talked about her family. Doña Elvira had noticed the way Natacha was looking at her.
"Forgive me, my dear, if you don't understand. We have great respect for the Polish people; they are very hardworking. Well, please don't take it the wrong way; I don't know how to speak any better. I say what I think and the first thing that comes to mind."
"Don't worry, Natacha. When my family hears her complain, they shut their mouths and smile as if they're watching a car go by."
"Doña Elvira," Natacha said, the "ñ" coming out with difficulty. "I understand almost everything, and you are a very good woman."
"And how do you know that?" Doña Elvira laughed, taking another glass of the sweet liquor they brought her from Santa Fe.
-Because the dogs love her…
The old woman stood up and hugged her, but Natacha didn't respond. Elvira whimpered, wondering what she had done wrong; perhaps people in Poland weren't so effusive. Then she asked her to accompany her to her room.
They walked along the veranda and then under the grapevine that covered part of the patio, and entered Doña Elvira's room. She lit a lamp and the room was illuminated, revealing the old, fine-wood bed, the dresser against a wall with lace tablecloths, porcelain ornaments, and many scraps of fabric.
-Excuse the mess, my daughter. I sew and mend a lot, but my eyesight can't keep up with it anymore.
Then he showed her an image of the Virgin Mary that was on a shelf embedded in the wall.
-It's Our Lady of Sorrows. I'm very devoted to her, you know?

Natacha raised her eyes with burning passion, and all the weariness seemed to transform into an expression of anguish that closely resembled the face in the image.
"I know what's wrong, my daughter, and that you're suffering because the union isn't blessed. The Virgin Mary will understand. If you like, I can talk to little Máximo. Men, no matter how good they are, don't understand anything until they have the child in their arms."
Natacha, however, was thinking about how the relics did not leave her, and at the same time as she prayed inwardly, the numbers of the days and months were settling into their correct place.
Yes, she would let Doña Elvira speak to Máximo. Let the theater of good intentions create the necessary atmosphere for events to unfold naturally. Now she knew she hadn't lost her father, but that she would have him back so she could hold him as she had never been able to before, in her arms, like a child.
That night they slept in separate rooms. The old woman had talked with Mendoza in the kitchen until after one in the morning. She heard him raise his voice, and she protested in her shrill voice. The dogs were sitting or lying down in front of the door. Then she saw him leave, head down, and go into the room where he had slept as a child.
In the morning, Doña Elvira opened the curtains and woke her up. She had brought her a tray with sweets, butter, and coffee.
-I didn't bring you the mate because you have to get used to it, for now coffee in the morning and lots of sweets to regain weight.
Natacha stared at her, still not understanding. The old woman searched through the clothes in the trunk, but nothing seemed to convince her. She went out and returned a while later with a white dress.
"It was mine," she said, picking it up and holding it out. "When I was young and skinny..."
-But...
"But no, my daughter, you have to get married properly. Besides, it's not just for you and the boy. Máximo's family would look down on you terribly if they found out. I know those women; they'd make your life a living hell even if you were a saint."
By ten o'clock in the morning they were on Independencia Street. They entered the Chapel of Spiritual Exercises, a simple and austere church with

rustic wooden pews. It wasn't a church in Warsaw, but Natacha liked that austerity that played on pain and self-pity.
The dress was far too big for her, but the old woman had put on thick-lensed glasses and had adjusted and sewn it in less than an hour. She had also sent Máximo to fetch Tomasa to prepare lunch while they were at church. At nine o'clock they heard them enter, along with a boy's voice.
-He's Tomasa's son, he's going to take them.
-But…
-But nothing… is that the only word you know in Spanish? My child isn't going to drive the sulky like it belongs to just any family.
At nine-thirty they climbed into the sulky, the two of them in the back. Natacha wore a linen dress with a wide, embroidered skirt and a veil over her face. Máximo wore a black tailcoat over a brown waistcoat and a white shirt, with a brown bow tie and a top hat. People watched them pass by and made comments. Doña Elvira then set off on foot, wearing her best dark silk dress, alone, trying in the first few blocks to keep the dogs from following her and leading her back home.
"Where are you going, ma'am?" the neighbors shouted as they watched her scare the animals away.
-The boy Máximo is getting married.
- And with whom, if I may ask?
"With a countess, no more and no less," she replied, proudly raising her head, while one of the dogs bit her skirt to restrain her.
There were few people in the church. No one knew about the wedding, of course, but the news soon spread throughout Buenos Aires. Máximo had taken the precaution of sending a telegram to Santa Fe, but he knew he would have to face his family's recriminations.
Before the altar, with a wooden Christ figure that must have been a relic carved by the Indians, they both vowed to remain together forever. The priest was young and wore only a surplice over an old cassock that must have belonged to the priest who had died not long before. He closed the Bible and blessed them, making the sign of the cross. They shared a very brief kiss, and the timid applause of Doña Elvira and two pious women, who spent most of the day at the church and served as witnesses, could be heard. When they stepped out onto the sidewalk, the four dogs wagged their tails and circled around them.

"This is our reception," Mendoza said. "I'm very sorry."
"I prefer genuine queues to fake smiles," Natacha replied.
Doña Elvira burst out laughing. She didn't truly understand that woman, nor did she know who she was or what she truly felt. Several times, upon touching her, she felt a kind of dark pain that her own optimism countered with a pleasant word, but above all, with a positive thought. She liked the devotion she had seen on her face when she looked at the statuette of the Virgin, but she wasn't sure if the feeling was related to the Catholic faith. Doña Elvira knew that all women have a strange depth, almost a bottomless well that many, like herself, filled with superficial things: trivial words, actions, and thoughts, and sometimes with something greater, perhaps the remnants of some inner collapse whose debris covered a large part of that strange well.
Whatever the case, she would never see them again. She had accomplished her mission. That afternoon they ate empanadas that Tomasa had prepared and drank with the neighbors and friends Máximo had in Buenos Aires, who arrived as they learned of the wedding, until late into the night. They slept in the same room where Máximo Mendoza had spent many years of his childhood and adolescence. It was an austere, masculine room, but in the drawers of the wardrobe there were still remnants of his childhood: shorts, a few baby shirts, and some rag dolls. Before dawn, while he slept, she took out an old teddy bear that had remained moth-free. She put it in the trunk, far back, and went back to bed. In two hours they would leave for the ranch.

They traveled up the Paraná River in a barge that Mendoza had anchored in the port. Almost everyone knew Máximo, and after embracing him and joking with the captain, they saw him board with his wife. They greeted her with a respectful gesture; they didn't even dare speak to her because they had been told she was a countess. Now they had three trunks, and the two assistants carried them aboard and arranged them in the cabin. Captain Mendoza himself piloted the barge, and they set off northward.
Natacha leaned on the railing, gazing at the riverbanks, so different from her homeland. This was dense, sweltering jungle. She no longer felt dizzy or lightheaded, even though the river had a strong current. Almost all the dresses she had bought in Buenos Aires were dark, because she thought

light colors drew attention. She didn't like people approaching her to talk unless she chose to, and black wasn't a somber color, but a noble one. It created distance and a necessary sense of time.
She unbuttoned the top button of her dress, and part of her throat and chest met the coastal sun. She rolled up her sleeves, revealing her slender, white forearms. She glanced from the riverbank toward the cabin where Máximo sat, to ask him the name of the tree and the large flowers floating on the river. And she listened to the quick, confident reply, vibrating in the still air, contemplating the exuberance that corresponded to the exotic names. She would never retain them in her memory, no matter how hard she tried. It was curious how her tremendous memory for reading and languages had refused to retain the names of things native to those places.
During the ten-day voyage, they stopped at several ports, but only so that Maximus could greet someone or attend to some business matter. She understood all the conversations, as long as she could hear them from her cabin or leaning on the rail, watching her husband and the others talk and laugh without paying her any attention, though they only glanced at her from time to time. They were rustic men who didn't know how to treat her, but she saw in them more docile and polite beings than the Cossacks who had killed her father.
"We'll be in Santa Fe tomorrow," Máximo had told her as he handed the wheel to one of the assistants and went to bed. He undressed and got into bed, placing one of his hands on Natacha's abdomen. She let him, and saw the delicate, timid way he ran his hand over her skin, caressing it and sliding it inch by inch downward, and then she stopped him.
-I'm afraid.
- About what?
-From your family.
-They will have no choice but to accept you.
-I already know that, but I don't know if they'll like me…
- Do you care that much?
- But what are they like?
"My uncles care about nothing more than land, cattle, and politics. And your aunts will have something to brag about in the city with your title and Polish ancestry. You should pretend you don't speak Spanish; that way

they'll make an effort to understand you. I can already picture them around you like idiots..."
"Women aren't like that, they'll recognize me, and they'll talk badly about me..."
-Stop worrying.
He placed one hand over his mouth and the other on Natacha's crotch. That night was different; perhaps it was the land recognizing him, or the river that stirred something different within him, something more rustic, stronger. He had grown a beard, and the stubble brushed against Natacha's cheeks, and even the hair on his chest now seemed coarser and pricklier, grazing her breasts. And for a moment he believed the boat was moving to the rhythm of Máximo Mendoza as he explored Natacha's body once more, as if it were a new branch of that immense river surrounded by walls of jungle.
When she went on deck in the morning, already dressed and with her trunks packed, ready to meet her in-laws, she saw that they were on the shores of a small, almost deserted port. Máximo was rigging the ship on the dock. He called her down. She went down the bridge and he welcomed her to the land of Santa Fe.
For the first time, perhaps because of the way he had emphasized the words, Natacha understood the meaning of that name. In a way that was still too strange for her, all her uncertainties suddenly fell into place, and were no longer uncertainties at all. The doubts and fears, the unease about who she was since Krakovsky's death, about what her beliefs were, about whether everything she had learned and believed as a child still held any value—all of that found its rightful place in this environment where there would be no more snow, no more steppes, no more Cossacks. In a completely different place, the sacred faith of her childhood—the books, the pictures, the crucifixes, and the strong, blond father god who embraced her—remained steadfast in a river of warm water, among tall trees with strident songs, and now the shadow of a dark-haired man. Opposites attract, she knew, both people and places. And time was a single continuum that she could not define.
Like ants, several women and men suddenly appeared from the shacks at the port. They all knew Mendoza and went out of their way to offer him something: one woman carried a mate gourd and a kettle in each hand,

others sweet empanadas, and the men brought along a cart and a horse. They climbed in and began the journey to the ranch. Natacha opened the cloth that one of the women had given her, and they ate pastries. It was the first time Natacha had tasted such things, and he smiled when he saw that she liked them. They talked and laughed about the people at the port as they traveled along the dirt roads that crossed rickety bridges over streams and wound through lagoons where large flocks of ducks or lapwings floated. Máximo found it amusing to see Natacha's astonished eyes. In those moments when she was in the land he knew, he felt safer than he had during the months he had spent in Europe. Poland was her incomprehensible homeland, but that country would no longer exist in their lives. Only the river and the ranch, the horses and the dogs, and the uncertain sky would be the inhabitants of their lives. And she would be clay in his hands. That's what he thought, but he also thought about the child, and that clay wasn't his, and he wasn't sure anymore, then, that he was thinking what he was thinking.

They arrived at the ranch, but had been in the fields belonging to the family for half an hour. The main house was a large, single-story building with a colonial roof, completely surrounded by a wide porch. An ombú tree stood more than fifty meters away, casting the afternoon's dappled shade toward the house, and on the other side, a short row of jacaranda trees sheltered the corrals. From behind the house, towering above the rooftops, was a grove of araucaria trees. The cart stopped a short distance from the entrance, and the dogs had already begun to surround them and follow them until they stopped. There were ten or fifteen of them, a mix of greyhounds and hounds, and some other smaller mixed breeds. Natacha couldn't help but laugh at the pack, wagging their tails and barking. A maid came out of the house, and Tomasa appeared behind her. Natacha was happy to see someone she knew.

"I just arrived with my friend, young man," the Black woman said. She greeted Natacha, but unlike the way they had treated each other in Buenos Aires, she barely looked at her now. Natacha sensed that perhaps the women of the house had forbidden her from trusting them.

Then a very young woman appeared, not very tall, but slender and wearing an evening dress. She was blonde and had a graceful, elegant walk. She stopped in front of them and extended her hand to Natacha.

"It's a pleasure, Countess," he said, winking at Maximus.
"No titles, Lucrecia. Natacha, she's my cousin." Suddenly, a young man ran up and grabbed the cousin by the waist to scare her. She turned around, annoyed at first, then smiled. There was no need to introduce them. The men embraced.
-It's been so long, my friend, so long…
-We haven't seen each other since the revolution of the seventies, have we?
-You went to Europe to rest, my dear, and you brought back a countess. Enough with the titles. Sorry Natacha, you're going to have to put up with them for a long time until they understand. This gentleman is my foster brother, Sebastián Aráoz Urquiza, my cousin's fiancé.
They entered the house and Natacha was introduced one by one to the three aunts. Two were married, and their husbands greeted her politely, still puffing on their pipes. The single woman gave her a long, lingering look from head to toe. Then she extended her hand and said:
-Good afternoon.
She was the only one who avoided the title, and Natacha took it as a declaration of war.

The following days consisted of settling into the house and learning the family customs. She didn't want to stand out too abruptly; she didn't want to appear haughty, but neither did she want to be submissive. When the spinster aunt, who was sitting in a rocking chair with a mate in her hand, saw the farmhands unloading the trunks, and that one of them was especially heavy, she asked:
- What's all that bulk?
Máximo was in the countryside, getting up to speed with the ranch's finances. His uncles were his mother's brothers, and the property didn't belong to them, so they hadn't kept much attention to the finances. The Hurtado de Mendoza family owned it, and Máximo's family was in Spain.
"Books, Aunt Clotilde," said Natacha.
The woman looked at her sarcastically, and said nothing.
That night, Máximo returned tired and went to bed early. Natacha was in the library, a spacious room with a central table and a window overlooking the araucaria trees. The bookshelves were almost empty. She had been

arranging and distributing the books she had bought in Buenos Aires. She felt a warm knock on the door, and Aunt Clotilde's voice said:
-Too many books for a woman. Probably novels with strange ideas.
Natacha stopped what she was doing and approached the woman.
-Please, Auntie, sit down.
The woman ignored him. She began scanning the shelves, picked one up, opened it, and looked at Natacha. She put it back and grabbed another. She did the same with several, until she placed the last one on the table and sat down.
- Do you want to tell me who's going to teach you how to read them?
"No one, Auntie, don't worry, we won't have to pay any teachers. I learned before coming here; Máximo helped me."
-So they've known each other for a long time, I understood that Máximo had only been in Warsaw for a few months.
-That's right, aunt...
-Don't lie, you shameless woman. You can't speak Spanish so perfectly or read those books in such a short time.
Natacha took a deep breath because she felt her heart racing; she was sweating, but she trusted that the dim lamplight wouldn't betray her. And even less so the trembling she felt rising in her throat. Any answer would be inappropriate, because the other woman wasn't about to believe her.
-With God's help, aunt, and especially the Virgin Mary's.
Natacha disappeared into the shadows, out of the light, and returned with something in her hands. She approached the woman and unwrapped the cloth.
-She is the Virgin of my homeland, aunt.
The woman didn't ask permission to take the image. She saw that the face was dark and the dress sumptuous and highly ornate. Then Natacha saw the expression lighten on the old woman's bronzed face, which was the same tone as Máximo's skin. He must have inherited it from his mother's family.
The woman returned the icon to him, and her eyes showed anguish and tenderness.
-She resembles Our Lady of Sorrows. At her admonition we surrendered the bodies of my sister and brother-in-law, when your husband was still a boy.

-She never told me how they died, aunt.
My brother-in-law was a naval officer, and he fought in the war with Paraguay. He was sent to Corrientes and then further north, in command of a fleet. He was killed at the Battle of Caaguazú. My sister wasn't very strong; Máximo was their only child, and she almost died in childbirth. She was even less able to bear Nicasio's death. The war continued, but she died before it ended. She was devoted to Our Lady of Sorrows. I cared for her all that time, while she died of grief. She made me promise that we would build a chapel on the ranch in honor of the Virgin.
- And you think so, aunt?
The woman looked her in the eyes.
- What do you think, my daughter? Who doesn't believe in pain? It's what builds the world.
He took her hand and they walked together down the hallway toward what Natacha assumed was the back of the house, because they stopped before a pointed archway without a door that let in a faint reflection of the moon. Outside, they could see the araucaria trees, some remains of hearths, and an old cistern. A few dogs were barking, but it was more of a whine.
They entered a small room, which, in the light of the lamp carried by the aunt, revealed its bare, white walls. There was only a prie-dieu in front of which stood the altar with the Virgin of Sorrows. The image, small and dark, stood out like a black stain on the wall.
"This is the room I had built when my sister died. Every morning, very early, when no one else is up except the farmhands and maids, I come here to say my ten-day prayer. Afterwards, I go to Mass. Now let's go to sleep; I'll take you tomorrow."
Natacha approached the image, which was taller than she was. She could only reach it by raising an arm and touching it with her hand. That's what she did. She never knew why she used her left hand, since she was usually right-handed. She only realized how much pain she felt when her fingers touched the statuette. Then she shuddered with a chill, and Aunt Clotilde noticed. The old woman took her by the shoulders and pulled her back with words she didn't understand. It was Latin, probably, or a prayer whispered in a very low voice.
When they left, Natacha asked him.
- What did he say to you, aunt?

-Nothing, my daughter, just some nonsense in Quechua, or whatever, because I never learned that complicated language.
- Did he apologize?
The old woman looked at her with a hint of astonishment.
- *Llakikinum* . That's what I meant. How did you know?
"It was just a hunch, because that's what I would have asked for in return for daring to touch her. She suffers a lot, Auntie, did you notice?"
The old woman led her to her room. She opened the door a crack and saw her nephew already asleep in bed.
"Good night, Aunt Clotilde," he said, kissing her cheek.
"Sleep well, my daughter." She was already leaving when she turned around and said, "Don't let him bother you when you don't want him to. Men cause pain."
Natacha lowered her gaze and replied:
- And what if I want to, too?
-Then kill the desire.
They realized they were standing in the middle of the hallway, with the bedroom door ajar, in the near darkness of one or two in the morning, probably talking about God.
- So what's the difference between the pain they inflict on us and the pain we inflict on ourselves?
Deprivation is a pain stronger than any that others can inflict upon us. Prohibition, my child, is absence. And what greater pain is there than the absence of God?
"That's what they say hell is like, Auntie. So it's like wishing for hell?"
"Despicable your life, my daughter, because none of ours are worth anything. The greater your contempt, the more valuable your humility."
That night, Natacha thought about all of it. She barely slept, staring at Máximo Mendoza's sleeping body, naked and covered by a sheet up to his waist. She longed to touch him, but refrained. She watched him breathe deeply. He must have drunk too much during that gathering with his brother-in-law and friends, talking about finances and the country. But they must have talked mostly about childhood memories, family, and surely about women they had known.
It was dawn when she heard noises outside. The farmhands had already started working. She could hear the sound of an axe, barking, and mooing.

She saw the shadows of two maids pass by the window, chatting as they walked toward town, perhaps to do some shopping. She smelled the aroma of freshly baked bread and coffee. She got up and dressed. Máximo was still asleep. She went out into the hallway and ran into Aunt Clotilde.
-Good morning, my daughter. How did you sleep?
-Okay, aunt.
-I already went to pray to the Virgin Mary. Now we're going to Mass, dear. It's at seven and we have a half-hour trip.
Natacha put a shawl over her shoulders, and as they left they passed one of the uncles. The man was yawning and waking up, dressed in riding clothes. "Here come the pious women," he said. "You've gained a disciple."
-Don't pay any attention to him, my daughter.
The man put on his beret and walked out, dragging the soles of his boots until the noise disappeared as he stepped onto the dry earth and mounted his horse.
They climbed into a cart driven by their aunt, who was grooming the old horse, which made its usual morning journey to the chapel. The morning was clear and clean, unlike the foggy, cold mornings of Poland. They watched the farmers and their wives pass by, surrounded by children, and traveled along a long, winding road through the trees, which widened as the houses became more frequent. The Chapel of Our Lady of Miracles was on the outskirts of Santa Fe. When they arrived, there were many women at the door and few men. They went inside, and Natacha saw the old Jesuit building, which made her feel as if she were entering a familiar place. The building's age was evident in the images on the sides: saints made of cracked and faded wood on whitewashed adobe walls.
When they arrived at the altar, they prostrated themselves before a Christ that Natacha had never seen before. It was carved from a single, large tree trunk, the wood grain uninterrupted except for the folds and curves of Jesus's skin and loincloth, where shadows molded the contours within which the main figure seemed immersed, trapped, and sheltered. For that was the impression the figure of Christ on the cross gave: a place where pain is a narrow, private hiding place. To look upon it was like spying on it. Natacha stood transfixed, unable to look away despite her embarrassment, as her aunt told them to sit down. They stepped back and took their places in the first row of seats. The others continued to enter and sit down. Many

women approached to greet them, and Aunt Clotilde introduced them to her daughter-in-law. Almost everyone knew she was a countess, and they kept approaching until the priest appeared in the atrium.
When the mass ended, they left surrounded by people, and the aunt tried not to be rude, but suddenly said:
"We'll see each other again, ladies, we'll see each other again..." And he grabbed Natacha tightly by the elbow and made her get into the cart.
Finally they left to return to the ranch, the old woman complaining about all those women who only wanted to please Natacha.
-Don't worry, aunt, they don't bother me.
-But I do.
At the ranch, Máximo and his uncles had gone out into the fields. The other women had gone shopping in town. Natacha and Aunt Clotilde had breakfast alone in a vacant lot under the araucaria trees.
-Tell me, aunt. Who made the Christ figure on the altar?
"The Indians, my daughter. The Jesuits had a very large mission here, when they were expelled everything was abandoned for many years. But that Christ remained healthy."
Natacha thought about the suffering face, where even the carved tears seemed as dark as the wood. Throughout the entire Mass, she had been observing the figure. The clenched, enraged hands, the twisted neck covered in blood dripping from the crown of thorns, the bare, gaunt torso riddled with scars that, on the wood, were like cracks where insects laid their eggs. Why did she think that, if she hadn't seen them? Or did she think she saw the flies crawling on the body? Then she saw Christ's legs, bony, with the feet crossed one over the other and pierced by the same nail. And what caught her attention was that both legs were fractured in different places, one on a thigh with a deep cut almost halfway up, and the other on the lower leg, oblique and more superficial.
- Did you see, Auntie, the damage they did to the Christ figure?
Clotilde looked at her sarcastically.
"I understand now, you're referring to the legs. It was on purpose, the Indians told me."
- And why do you know them so well?
"Because either you get along with them, or they'll massacre you. I'm not talking about here, but they're still wild at the border outposts. Besides,

these people were domesticated by the priests, and they're more submissive than our dogs. They built the little chapel here on the ranch. The family didn't want anything to do with it, but I insisted. After all, it was in memory of my sister and brother-in-law. And the Indians are the best artisans in the area. They're artists, and they create according to their visions."

They remained silent as the morning slowly unfolded under a sun that revealed the trees and subjected the main house of the ranch to a scorching blanket of heat and discomfort. The dogs barked occasionally, and the trot of the horses being taken out for walks by the ranch hands could be heard. The roofs of the farmhouse gleamed and seemed to be complaining of the heat that would lash them throughout the day.

- But why those cuts?

"Look, my daughter. I don't understand much about it, because it's all very complicated, like everything the Jesuits did. They taught the Indians religion mixed with science, and all in the service of God, of course, although they were expelled for something more earthly, so they say. But be that as it may, the Indians learned mathematics, and they applied it to the arts with which they built the church."

The old woman took the rosary out of her pocket and showed the cross to Natacha.

- Do you see how three sides of the cross are equal and the other is longer? If you shorten this one, you get almost perfect symmetry. And if you draw a line between each point, you form a rhombus, but if you take a compass and place it in the center, you form a circle.

The aunt took a deep breath and drank some mate. Natacha waited, then asked for one. It was the first time she would try it. The aunt congratulated her when she passed the test. She had liked it, she said, but then only accepted out of obligation.

- And then what?

-In every circle, the Greek number, Pi, is calculated, which they say is infinite.

Natacha remained lost in thought. Pain was necessary, whatever its form, and physical pain is always more evident, and seemingly more effective, than spiritual pain, simply because it is more immediate. Our bodies, she told herself, are a burden; our flesh is made to die, but first it must bleed,

and be beaten and cut. Without that, it is not flesh. Without that, it is merely worthless tissue because it has never been tested. Why, otherwise, the sacrifices? Christ had been the ultimate lamb.
Symmetry and infinity.
The lasting meat.

From then on, Aunt Clotilde was her only ally. Because when Máximo announced to the family—one Sunday while they were having lunch under some trees, with the large fire roasting the meat a few feet from the table, and the maids going back and forth with drinks for the women and wine for the men, surrounded by the dogs circling around—that Natacha was pregnant, everyone fell silent for a few seconds. Only for her did that time feel much longer. She saw in the family's eyes that they all understood that not enough time had passed since the wedding, but then a burst of laughter erupted in the booming voice of Uncle Álvaro, her older sister's husband. He got up from the chair where he had been sitting, as if prostrate from the midday sun, the meat, and the wine, and shook Máximo by the shoulders, hugging and patting him. He was drunk, and that's why he had disregarded what in others was still at least a resentment, if not tacit disapproval.
"But anyway, kid, nobody needs to know, these things are very common," he whispered in his ear, but everyone heard him.
Natacha lowered her gaze and placed her hands on her skirt. Aunt Aurelia approached to congratulate her, wearing the usual grimace she used to calm the family's tempers. She gave her a curt kiss on the cheek and went to find her husband to sit down. The other aunt, the more serious and prim one, stood up and began talking to Clotilde. They seemed to be arguing in hushed tones, until Aurelia approached Natacha and said:
"Clotilde will be your scribe, and she will answer for you, my dear." Then she went over to where her husband was, tall and thin with a thick, gray mustache.
Aunt Clotilde sat down next to Natacha and told her not to worry. Natacha had already realized it, but something worth more than any social appearance had blossomed between them. Máximo didn't think it wise to approach his wife. The family watched him, and he sat down to chat with Uncle Álvaro and Aunt Aurelia. The afternoon passed, and then came the mate, fried cakes, and lots of sweets.

The sun set over them all: Uncle Álvaro lay on the grass, next to two dogs that occasionally licked his face; his married aunts had gone inside; Clotilde and Natacha sat with books in their hands, talking. The embers slowly died down, and a cool breeze arose from among the trees. Máximo leaned against a cut log, smoking his pipe. He gazed toward the main house and those still outside. He looked at Natacha, whose gaze he caught from time to time. He knew she was reproaching him for his silence. He was pleased that Máximo had found in one of his aunts the protection that no one else would ever offer him. Before setting foot again on the land where he was born, he had thought that he and Natacha would be an invincible bulwark against the family. But when he faced them, he became once more the young orphan whom they all protected. Whether it was war or women, everything posed a threat to the family's future. They saw him as the only possible continuation of the lofty legacy they believed they carried on their shoulders. And now that a shameless, down-on-her-luck Polish countess had seduced him with a child and marriage, they could no longer let him go. He had always been a boy who rebelled against the rules, liked to hide or run away, and loved the river and its dangers. But they also knew he was smarter than all of them, a trait he had inherited from his father, Nicasio. The Hurtado de Mendoza family had left him in the care of his mother's family, Creoles who couldn't be entirely trusted. The war had already taken one of their sons, and to save their grandson, they had sent him to Europe for over a year to keep him there. But Máximo, just when he was almost convinced, had met Natacha, and suddenly the need arose to start over, but in the land where he was born.
His mother's family lived off investments that no longer yielded enough. They had squandered part of the Mendoza fortune, and now Máximo knew they had to economize. The money his relatives in Spain could send him was a resource he didn't want to use unless absolutely necessary.

Natacha's son had been born in October of the year following her arrival. It was two months earlier than expected, but no one said anything about it, because something else was even more obvious. He was completely blond and his skin was whiter than milk. Máximo saw him in the crib next to Natacha's bed. He gazed at that fragile little body, which could easily have passed for a premature baby. But how could he hide that blondness that

contrasted so sharply with them? He looked at Natacha, who was looking at the child the same way she looked at his father. It was admiration, and more than that. Perhaps a kind of awe.
What Máximo had painstakingly buried under millions of tons of ocean water, thousands of kilometers away, and the full weight of his country's land, had resurfaced, unscathed and reborn. The fair complexion of Alexei Krakovsky, the Pole, shone like the sun in the middle of the Santa Fe countryside. And that was what he discovered on her face: the ecstasy of seeing the maids and farmhands she had brought to meet the boy gazing at him in rapture.
"But he's an angel!" said one, and the others seconded her, while the men looked at the boy and the father, as if confused.
Natacha was at the height of her beauty: her black hair loose over her white neck and her dark nightgown. Her eyes shone because her child was the object of admiration for all those poor, simple people. Had the boy come to be a symbol, perhaps? That's probably what she thought, while Máximo watched her from across the room, hoping his workers' adoration of the child would finally end. And then he realized he was seeing the scene in that room as he had seen it so many times before in the nativity scenes at Christmas.
-We'll call him Ariel, won't we, dear?
Word and vision coincided in her mind. She was surely thinking of that: the Virgin and Child, Joseph and the shepherds. Only the Magi were missing, and that's when her uncles came in with gifts.
That night there were celebrations for all the adults, except for Natacha, the boy, and Aunt Clotilde. Until almost dawn there was music with guitars, dancing, shouting, and laughter. Two cows were slaughtered and roasted, and Tomasa had to bring two young women from the village to help her. The aunts fell silent that night. The obvious had to be covered up with silence, which is often stronger than iron.

During the next two years, they sold land and their estate. The savings allowed them to recover, but at the end of the tenth year of their marriage, López was assassinated and the coastal provinces were placed under federal intervention. The army arrived from Buenos Aires and occupied the homes of the landowners, and since no one could refuse for fear of being

considered a rebel, they let the months pass while their estate was irretrievably lost.

But the truth was that Máximo saw his marriage crumbling from the moment they arrived in Santa Fe, and Ariel's birth was merely the pretext for them to continue living together. Natacha had become a devout woman who went to Mass every morning, and when Aunt Clotilde grew older and more frail, it was the perfect excuse for him to never leave her side. They slept in separate rooms at night since the boy's birth, but he knew she stayed up reading theology books until two or three in the morning. He knew this because she had taken to going to town and having dinner with her friends. Sometimes Aráoz Urquiza accompanied him, but not always because Lucrecia didn't like it; in any case, she did most of the time because Máximo would get drunk and didn't want to let him walk back to the ranch alone. But when he returned more or less sober, he would see the light in the library, and sometimes he would peek in to greet her. He would ask how Ariel was, she would answer by looking up from her book, and then go back to ignoring him.

She had grown fond of the boy. He was shy and reserved. When he was eight, he had begun to show a talent for drawing, and she would bring him pencils and notebooks from the city. They made a habit of going to the grove behind the ranch house and sitting with their backs against a tree trunk, gazing at the tall, leafy foliage. They would exchange childish opinions, and the boy would begin to draw. She didn't want to disturb him, because a single glance could be enough to make him feel self-conscious and stop drawing. Natacha knew this, and she didn't like what Ariel drew. He sketched trees and river animals, birds, sometimes the outline of the ranch house, even some of the ranch hands.

"We should bring in a drawing teacher," he told his wife, the afternoon they celebrated Ariel's tenth birthday.

But Natacha had other plans.

When the army arrived to settle in, they occupied the stables and the workers' quarters. There were few workers left, so most of the beds were empty, and they spent their days waiting for government orders, consuming the Mendoza family's cattle. They said the government would repay them when the intervention was lifted, but they didn't trust that. They were the first to see the parish priest enter the ranch. He walked

somewhat hunched over, his worn cassock flapping with his quick steps, a Bible clutched to his chest in his right hand. He didn't look to the sides, where the soldiers sat or lay on the ground around the ranch, nor at the officers in the shade of the portico.
It was Sunday, so Máximo was at home, and he saw him come in.
-Good afternoon, is the lady of the house home?
Maximo was at his desk, he put aside the accounts that hadn't been closed all day, and asked:
- Who is looking for her?
-I am your son's new teacher.
Then Ariel appeared in the room, and when he saw the priest he ran to him and hugged his cassock.
Máximo Mendoza refrained from answering what he needed to answer, and maintained a hostile silence when Natacha received the priest and they took Ariel to the library. Two hours later, he saw them leave. He was still working on his calculations, useless because he no longer paid attention to them. He greeted the priest indifferently. Natacha's gaze had taken on a contemptuous tone for some years now. Had it been his fault, perhaps? His indifference, his trips to town, the women, maybe? Because she wouldn't be unaware that he sought them out. Or so many theology books, or the church? Perhaps it was the family's disdain, that lack of love so starkly contrasted with the outpouring of affection she saw him receive among the townspeople?
Natacha was a solid, strong, thin body, dressed in dark clothing, with a disapproving face and dry words.
Since they arrived in America, she only laughed when she was with Ariel. Did he miss Poland? Did he miss Krakovsky?
Only once, four years after Ariel was born, had he wanted to ask her. And back then she was a pious woman who refused to sleep in the same bed as him, accepting only a kiss as a greeting. He went to her room, entered, and closed the door. Natacha hadn't invited him; that's what her face showed. He couldn't ask her then, because everything had already been said. Above the bed, on the wall, was a wooden crucifix that the Indians from the Chapel of Miracles had given her. Next to the bed was a table with a photograph. For a moment he was confused and thought it was Ariel. But the portrait was of a young man of twenty or a little older.

If he was so hostile to him, Mendoza told himself, if he despised him so much, then there was no act that could worsen his opinion of him.
He felt such rage that he couldn't stop himself, conscious of every single movement he made. He threw the portrait to the floor and, squeezing Natacha's hands, held her down on the bed.
-He and I are like night and day, aren't they?
He tried to kiss her and was met with a gaunt face that didn't even have a scent. He tried to find excitement in the very anger he felt, even in reliving what had happened in Warsaw when she lived with her father. But nothing drew him toward Natasha's body anymore, because her soul no longer interested him.
Some of that anger resurfaced on the Sunday the priest visited. That night they argued. Their voices echoed throughout the house, much louder than usual. The maids listened behind the doors, and the men waited in the arcade, thinking that perhaps something was about to happen. Aunt Clotide had been bedridden for ten months after a stroke, and although she could hear, she couldn't move or speak. The others didn't leave their rooms; they were used to it.
A week later, the priest didn't come, even though it was supposed to be Ariel's first day of lessons. That same Sunday, Maximus went to the boy's room and announced that they would spend the day at the river. They left hand in hand. Maximus helped him onto the horse and tied down the provisions, and they set off, accompanied by two dogs.
From that day on, every weekend they went boating. Máximo taught him the basics of sailing and fishing. Ariel laughed more openly and was no longer afraid to get dirty or shout if he wanted to. Sometimes they camped overnight and returned Monday or Tuesday morning, dirty and tired. Ariel watched his mother's expression as she waited for them at the door, silent and sullen. She walked quickly past him, and Máximo ignored her.
For five years Ariel and Máximo became the father and son they had not been during the first ten.
The federal intervention had been lifted, but the economy remained poor. They lost more farmhands, and only Tomasa and a maid remained for the household. Mendoza had contacted his family in Spain, and after several letters, he announced that he would buy a ship to make coastal voyages on the Paraná River.

The family, the few who remained, because Aunt Aurelia had died and Uncle Alvaro was dying of cirrhosis in a sanatorium, looked at him as if he had gone mad.
- But what about the family?
-I only asked them for help to make my way on my own…
"How embarrassing..." said the other aunt.
"Do you prefer to lose the land and the house? We have nothing but expenses: Ariel's education, of course, if we want him to continue having private tutors, and the nurse for Aunt Clotilde, and the expenses of Uncle's sanatorium, and the taxes Buenos Aires charges us, and the loan to the Valentes..."
"Enough," Natacha said. "You don't need to explain. And who's going to be in charge and pilot it?"
-I'm a captain, aren't I?
- And will you be gone for a long time?
"Maybe all year," he said. "I'll send them the profits to pay off the debts."

When Ariel turned fifteen, he was no longer so withdrawn or shy, but he remained introverted. All the years his mother had taken him to mass every morning in the village, the daily prayers, and the veneration of crucifixes and images of the Virgin had instilled in him a sense of guilt for everything he did or said. Only with Máximo could he forget that feeling, but for that, he needed to be away from the ranch, where everything and every place reminded him of his mother. The night he overheard his father's plans at the dinner table, he already knew them because they had discussed them during a fishing trip. Máximo had told him it was necessary to leave, but Ariel thought more about the boat and the river.
His tall, slender teenage body had grown a little thicker in the shoulders and legs from the work they did together on their trips along the Paraná River. Mendoza had taken him along on his travels through the riverside towns, looking for old boats he could repair. He planned to buy a large one to carry goods and passengers, one that could withstand long voyages north. He also hoped to reach Brazil. They talked about the lands Máximo had seen in America and Europe, but when the topic of Poland came up, he fell silent, no matter how much Ariel questioned him.

Finally, one day they went to Buenos Aires and found an old Napoleonic-era sailing ship languishing at a dock. It had a damaged figurehead, and the name " *La Conquéte* " was inscribed on one side. They boarded and explored the deck and interior. Its immense size gave the impression of a bygone era that had stood still. Mendoza spoke with many men in Buenos Aires, and Ariel accompanied him everywhere he went. They told him the ship was a wreck, but it occurred to him that its age and size might be an asset for the success of his business. He spoke with an engineer. He had the idea of converting the ship into a steamship, preserving the masts and adapting the keel for the river.

He sent telegrams to Spain and received, time and again, the sum he requested, which grew larger each time as the months passed and one arrangement led to another. Twice the steam engines broke down during trials; the ship was simply too heavy. Finally, they succeeded, and on the day of its launch, the only members of the family present were Ariel and Aráoz Urquiza. The ship was christened “Juan Manuel de Rosas.” Those who saw it launched in Buenos Aires remarked that such a name would not bode well for commercial success, but Máximo knew that along the coast, the opposite would be true.

The first trip would be later; the contracts still needed to be finalized and technical details ironed out. The three of them returned to Santa Fe. Natacha had been too busy tending to Aunt Clotilde's health and had eased her concern for Ariel. She didn't like the attachment that had grown between them, but she had relented because Aunt Clotilde had advised her that the boy needed a father figure, that he couldn't continue growing up under his mother's wing, especially now that he was a teenager. She had said all this shortly before falling ill. And now Aunt Clotilde was getting worse. Sometimes she seemed dead because her breathing was barely perceptible; other times, she would try to get up by pushing herself up with the one arm she had left, and she would fall out of bed. Twice she fractured a leg and an arm, and to her bedridden state were added the splints for more than a month. The nurses who helped care for her came and went because they couldn't tolerate the way she treated them. In the end, she decided to avoid them and have Tomasa help her. The old Black woman complained that she had to cook and clean the house, that it was too much work. She wasn't saying this because of her aunt, but because of Natacha.

In her eyes, Natacha had made Máximo Mendoza unhappy, the boy she had helped raise and whose parents had given her her freedom. But she did it, and every morning, since they no longer went to Mass, the two women changed the bed linens and washed Aunt Clotilde's body. They argued, they insulted each other, and the old woman watched them without being able to intervene.

The day they returned, Ariel told him he wanted to accompany his father on his next trips. It was just the three of them; the remaining uncles had moved to Santa Fe after an argument with Natacha.

"You're crazy!" she said.

"It will be a trial period," Mendoza said. "I know he's young, but he's learned a lot these past few years."

"Absolutely not! That's final in this house! Come on, Ariel, you've finished your dinner! Let's go to your room." She stood up and grabbed the boy by the arm. Máximo watched them disappear behind the door. Five minutes later, she came out and locked it. There was no sound from inside.

Máximo and Natacha argued loudly in the dining room. Glasses were knocked over, and the dogs, as always when they heard them, hid in the corners and under the table. Tomasa listened from behind the kitchen door, afraid that young Máximo would lose his mind and abuse his wife. "She's a harpy disguised as a saint," the Black woman would say to anyone who would listen. "She fawned over young Máximo and had ruined her own son." Tomasa didn't trust priests or God, because there were churches for whites and others for Blacks.

She was already falling asleep leaning against the door when she heard a gunshot. She opened the door in a panic and saw Natacha sitting in the dining room. She looked for Máximo and found him pointing a shotgun at Ariel's door. He had broken the lock. He dropped the weapon and shouted:

- Son! Go to my room, now!

He looked at Natacha.

-Ariel is going to sleep with me tonight.

He saw no trace of expression on Natacha's face. If only he had seen at least a hint of pain that represented her entire life. But he didn't realize that she had petrified that pain, turning her body and soul into a carved wooden cross with the features of Christ. There were folds like cracks that

no one saw, but they were there beneath those black dresses that made her resemble the sorrowful Virgin.
In the morning, Aunt Clotilde was found dead. Tomasa entered the room and saw Natacha sitting by the bed in her usual chair, holding Aunt Clotilde's hand and the rosary that had belonged to the old woman.
"Tell the boss," he told the black woman.
Tomasa went to Máximo's room, and when no one answered, she opened the door. Father and son were still in bed, asleep and still dressed. The room smelled of sweat and urine. She saw the chamber pots under the bed and emptied them. She shook Mendoza's shoulder, and he opened his eyes.
"Aunt died," he told her.
Mendoza got up and washed his face in the sink.
-You go and help the lady, I'll take care of the boy.
She woke Ariel and told him what was happening. They changed their clothes and went to her aunt's room. The priest and the doctor had already arrived for the death certificate. The few remaining farmhands came by to offer their condolences.
They kept vigil over their aunt all day and night. Máximo took care of the paperwork for the funeral and burial in the village, and neighbors and family friends came and went from the house. The only surviving sister sat in the chair that had been her favorite during her life in the house, and her husband stood beside her. They neither cried nor spoke. They were simply there, waiting.
The funeral and burial in the village cemetery were somber, especially because of the number of parishioners from the church Aunt Clotilde had attended for forty years. During the service, Natacha gazed intently at the Christ figure on the altar, just as she had the morning she first saw it. The Christ hadn't aged, but the cracks in the wood were more numerous. She knew this because she had counted them every week for the past fifteen years. God was an accountant who never made mistakes; He kept a ledger in which He recorded everyone's good and bad fortune. But it wasn't possible that each crack in the carving represented a new misfortune for each man or woman; perhaps the crack was a millionth of a millimeter, but all of that was beyond her comprehension. She had accepted it, or rather, she had resigned herself to accepting it after having sketched hundreds of

geometric or numerical diagrams on the countless pages she kept in her library.
A diagram of God's plans. That would have been beautiful.
And without listening to the priest's sermon, she continued staring at the body of Christ, unwilling to relinquish the pride of her intelligence, which made her feel guilty, and that guilt fueled the vanity of her grief: the more intense the pain, the greater the pride. That was what she would offer to Our Lady of Sorrows when she returned home. That was what she told herself every day and every night since she could no longer go to Mass with her aunt.
When they returned to the ranch, Máximo went to his room. Natacha went to the chapel and asked Ariel to accompany her.
They knelt together at the prie-dieu. After a moment of silence gazing at the image, she asked:
- What did your father tell you last night?
-Nothing, we slept.
Did you know I used to sleep with my father back in Warsaw? Men's bodies are beautiful and protective. I wish you could have met him; he looked a lot like you.

The “Juan Manuel’s” first trip had to wait almost three months until the inheritance and probate proceedings for Aunt Clotilde were completed. On the Saturday the will was read, her sister and brother-in-law were there, along with her cousin Lucrecia and her husband, and the two of them with Ariel. At the last minute, the priest arrived and sat near the door.
The aunt left all her earthly possessions to the church.
No one spoke, only the priest coughed once. The papers were signed and the notary left.

In the morning, Máximo and Ariel were taking their suitcases out to put them in the cart. Tomasa would accompany them. They were going to Buenos Aires to begin their first trip. When she went inside to say goodbye to Natacha, they found her dressed in her wedding gown and with a suitcase beside her.

"I have no one to keep me here anymore. I won't let my son become a drunken sailor like you. Let them close the ranch or let your relatives take care of it."
There were no arguments that could convince her. Ariel heard them arguing throughout the entire voyage. When they arrived in Buenos Aires, she gazed at the ship, a relic of another time and another land.
She thought of Poland and looked at her son, now taller than her and with a soft beard that was beginning to grow, which made him even more worthy of his lineage.
Then she knew she hadn't been wrong to go with them. She boarded the ship, and believed she had recovered her past.

*

Julio Ruiz heard a knock on the cabin door. He rubbed his eyes and stretched. He had slept all night in the chair next to the bed, but Manuel was still lying there, naked and barely covered by the sheets, which he threw off as soon as they covered him. Sometimes his eyelids fluttered without him opening his eyes; he was probably dreaming. Judging by the grinding of his teeth, the tense muscles in his neck, and his clenched fists, it wasn't pleasant at all.
The knock on the door came again.
Julio washed his face in the almost empty basin, unbuttoned his pants and urinated in the vessel that Manuel also used, but Manuel had not gotten up all night and the sheets were wet.
They struck again.
"Who is it?!" he asked angrily.
- Natacha.
Julio looked up at the ceiling and resigned himself.
-Just a moment, ma'am…
He buttoned his shirt, straightened it, and hid the vase under the bed. He opened the shutters and saw that it was already past ten in the morning.

The sky was cloudy, and the typical activity of the city and port could be seen along the coast.
He opened the door, and Natacha came in, her face haggard and wearing the same dress as the day before. Although almost all of them were black, he had learned to recognize them. She must have slept fully dressed, if she had slept at all, because it was easy to imagine her kneeling on the floor, worshipping the hand he had taken wrapped in a sheet. What had he done with it?
-Good morning, ma'am.
"Good morning, Julio," she replied, without looking at him, because her gaze was fixed on the bed. "How was your night?"
He slept, if you can call the dreams or nightmares he must be having sleep. He moves constantly and occasionally groans.
- Is he sick?
Julio tried to perceive some feeling in the question.
-He has a fever, that's all.
Can you hear us?
"I think so, but he keeps his eyes closed as if he doesn't want to see us. He doesn't answer me, and if I put food in his mouth, he doesn't even spit it out. He keeps it in his mouth, and I have to take it out so he doesn't choke."
- Is that what's called catatonia, Julio?
Not exactly. The movements he's exhibiting shouldn't be there if that were the case, but every case is different. The aftereffects of emotional trauma vary from person to person, and it's possible that his peripheral motor reflexes, as well as his autonomic reflexes, remain normal.
"I understand, Julio. You are an extremely intelligent man who has had bad luck in life. And above all, you are very kind, taking care of this man you barely know, and knowing what he has done."
He paused, and there was no response. Julio still had his hands behind his back and his gaze fixed on the bed.
-I must ask you a very big favor. Don't think I haven't thought this through; I did it all night.
He opened his right hand, which until then had been hidden in a fist beneath his left palm, both hands held in front of his chest. Julio had thought it was a gesture of prayer, but when he read what was on the paper, the meaning of the hands became a symbol of prey.

She had handed him a piece of paper folded in quarters. He took it and unfolded it. He read what she asked him to do, folded it again, and gave it back to her.
"Only you can do it without him dying," she said.
- And why doesn't he just kill him?
Only God can decide that. I am merely an instrument of punishment.
Does God not have hands? Did he not create man in his own image and likeness?
Natacha sat on the edge of the bed, placed her hands on the mattress, and the paper was left abandoned next to Manuel's feet, who was breathing heavily.
"I'm not asking for your opinion, Julio. This isn't a matter of principle. If you don't do it, I will, and I'm sure you'd bleed to death in my hands, or worse."
- And what could be worse than what she's asking for a man?
"Consider it a hygienic measure, Julio. This way, sin will stop spreading. I know you're not a believer, but you are a cultured man. You must know the verse in Matthew that refers to removing whatever gives us occasion to sin."
Julio approached Natacha and grabbed her arm.
"I always thought you were a sick woman, ma'am. I ask you to leave and lock yourself in your room to cry."
She looked at him, frightened. When he let go of her, he said:
"Very well, if that helps you get started. You'll be doing it for all of us, Julio, especially you. My husband told me why your career has collapsed. There's an arrest warrant out for you, Julio. A telegram to Buenos Aires, where Dr. Farías lives, and they'll come looking for you."
His hands opened with the gesture of a priest making the Consecration, but his were intended to show what surrounded them: an old boat and a job, both flimsy, but dignified enough compared to prison, or to being shot.

Julio Ruiz knew Congressman Bartolomé Farías very well. His family had patrician roots, with some even appearing in the records of the Cabildo during the British Invasions, at least. But it was said that even in the times of the Second Founding, there had been a Farías who had trudged through the muddy streets of old Buenos Aires. Whether this was true or not, or whether this Farías who walked alone through what was then a village of

poor people was a relative of his, perhaps not even he knew for sure. But to enhance his own prestige, he confirmed it, because when Dr. Ruiz was urgently summoned to the congressman's mansion in the Palermo neighborhood, Farías had just begun his second term in the legislature. The campaign had been more demanding than his first term. "A lot of barbs and a lot of lies," he told him the night he summoned him. Ruiz had gained some renown in Buenos Aires after his time in France. The doctors in Buenos Aires had received him coldly, but they couldn't say, as they had of others, that he was a carnival barker. His degree and his internship with Charcot didn't allow for such disregard for his dignity.

"Come in, Doctor," said Farías, shaking his hand firmly and enthusiastically. The man was no taller than him, but broad-shouldered, already bald, and with long mustaches that ended in a small curl. Then he picked up the pipe he had left on the table.

-I'm sorry to bother you at this hour, but you've been highly recommended to me, you know? You're an eminent figure, and still so young.

-It's not that big of a deal, doctor.

"Don't apologize. Those of us who have something to boast about shouldn't apologize for that. Who would? The word of flatterers is worthless, and we already have more than enough of the others."

He must have been over forty, but he was a sturdy man and kept himself agile. It was evident in the way he walked through the dining room of the mansion, dodging the chairs with legs and backs carved with delicate figures, and carefully treading the plush carpets of the hallway that led to the bedroom where his wife was. They stopped before the door, and he said to her in a low voice:

-This is my wife's fourth pregnancy; she lost the other three before delivery... Well, actually, the first one was born, but only lived for two days.

-I understand… How old is she?

"She's very young! That's not the problem. The other doctors say her uterus isn't ready—how do you say it?—properly, I suppose. This time I'm worried because she's already nine months along, and she's very anxious."

-I understand, doctor… may I come in?

"Absolutely not! But please, to you I'm Bartolo. I told her you were a friend, because she's very reluctant to see any more unknown doctors."

He opened the door and gave a loud shout that startled Ruiz after the whispering behind the door.
- Eugenia, my dear! We have visitors.
Julio Ruiz appeared at Farías's wife's bedside. She was thin and couldn't have been more than thirty years old. Pregnancy was taking a terrible toll on her, he told himself. She looked gaunt and pale.
- May I check it, ma'am?
She nodded listlessly. He asked her the usual questions, examined her chest, and felt her abdomen. She had no fever, and her pulse was normal. He listened to the woman's belly and heard the baby's faint heartbeat.
"Everything seems to be in order, ma'am," he said, and Farías approached with a big smile and patted Ruiz.
-But that's what I tell Eugenia, but she gets worried and only eats a bite of bird food.
Farías's smile and expression were deliberately optimistic, as if he knew more than he had told Ruiz. When they returned to the dining room, they sat down and drank some liqueur that Farías's mother made in Santa Fe.
"Do you know, Bartolo," said Ruiz, now receiving the tacit permission of Deputy Farías, "if the lady has a family history of similar cases?"
"Not that I know of. My in-laws died before I met Eugenia, and I was already an old man when I met her. She lived alone in a rented house and supported herself by sewing. She was always very delicate. She's like a bird, I don't know, don't laugh. Here I am, so strong with these hands, with this booming voice, so much so that they're afraid of me in Congress when I speak. But when it comes to her, these fingers that you see as so rough barely touch her so as not to hurt her. Sometimes, Julio, I think I've hurt her when, you know what I mean..."
Don't worry. I'd like to know the diagnosis of the first boy's death...
Farías cleared his throat and placed his pipe on the table.
"Look, Julio." The man's eyes were shining. "Damn it! Imagine me, at my age, whining like a little girl!"
Ruiz maintained the expected silence on such an occasion.
"We barely know each other, and I already trust you. That's why I'm going to tell you, Julio, something not even my Eugenia knows. The other doctors, the ones who attended her during her other pregnancies, were complete incompetents. And I was preoccupied with other things, with Buenos Aires

politics, which has given me a lot of headaches. *My fault* , I admit it. When I met Eugenia, I thought I was already a confirmed bachelor, one of those who flits from one to another. You weren't around back then, but I made a name for myself. When I married her, everyone said the little bird had married the rhinoceros. And do you know what Eugenia thought when she heard that comment? Have you ever seen those little birds pecking at the backs of rhinoceroses, and they both live together harmoniously?"
Farías let out a laugh that echoed throughout the room. His wife heard it and asked what was wrong in a thin, barely audible voice.
- It's okay, darling!
Then Farías got up and went to close the door that separated the dining room from the hallway.
-Wait a minute, Julio.
He disappeared through another door for a few minutes. Ruiz checked the time on his watch. It was half past midnight. He had to be at the French Hospital very early in the morning for some appointments. But Farías's familiarity was pleasant. He poured himself another liqueur and looked with pleasure at the china in the display cabinets, the lace tablecloth, and the centerpiece, perhaps bought in Paris. A strong aroma of oak wafted from the hearth. He had no friends in Buenos Aires; all his acquaintances since his arrival had been colleagues and coworkers. Farías was the only man who had spoken to him more like a friend than a professional. His expansive temperament was what he, in his professional bias, would have called sanguine. But Ruiz knew that there was rarely an exact correlation between the symptoms and what he had found in the anatomy. That was what had alienated him, or as Charcot told him when they parted ways, what had distanced him from the Salpêtrière school. The positivism prevalent in the neurological school clashed with the psychiatric studies he had heard Breuer speak of. He had crossed paths with him several times in the corridors where the patients came and went, their eyes glazed and lost. Breuer was a man who believed no more in anatomy than in the words spoken by the insane. And suddenly, he no longer had his French home, and the Austrian school of neuropsychiatry had rejected him. He returned to Buenos Aires after fifteen years, and the city was different. But the cosmopolitanism of the theaters was one thing, and the decrepitude of the hospitals another, both in Paris and in Buenos Aires. That's why he didn't

feel out of place, and his French accent won him a clientele he wouldn't have been able to gain had he stayed. "Why had you gone to France to study?" he was asked many times. Simply because his mother was French, and the Larrières separated him from his Creole father and took him to Europe. Ruiz's father had died in the countryside, on the horse he used to travel the ranches and towns of the province, visiting the sick, prescribing cures, and delivering babies, many of whom died. Because he was also a doctor.

The day he received a letter from Buenos Aires informing him of his father's death, a package arrived containing the only things his father had left at the boarding house where he lived. Inside were a stethoscope and a reflex hammer. Both were old and worn, but he placed the stethoscope to his ears and listened to his own heart for the first time. He was seventeen years old. His heart rumbled as if in an empty box, but suddenly he heard a strange sound that wouldn't be repeated until much later, when another doctor examined him. A sound like something else alive inside him, something that didn't belong to his body. When he thought about this, his mind projected an imprecise image onto his memory, which over time would be shaped by various interpretations of the sound he had heard. Because it was like a very brief piece of music that he could never again—or rather, never dared to—listen to with the stethoscope he would use throughout his career. Simply placing it on his chest would have been enough, but doing so would have meant revealing something he feared, without knowing why, and exchanging fiction for reality. This was how he had decided to act, in the same way he had seen each of his patients do when, faced with the truth he was prepared to give them, they chose fiction.

If I had ever attempted a neuropsychiatric theory, I would have used absurdity as a common factor, and both hypothesis and corollary would cancel each other out, because the result of absurdity is continuous contradiction, and the final result: nothingness, zero. Or perhaps the same thing, the eternal circle. Many obsessive pathologies had as their *leitmotif* something repeated, sometimes a word or combination of words, but much more often it was numbers.

In the music he had heard around the beating of his heart, or at least the lilting melody he thought he remembered hearing, there was also a refrain,

and as such, the circle was the inevitable result of that musical geometry. A circle is a closed figure, which only seemingly has limits. But when the human brain decides to measure it, it encounters the absurdity of infinity.
All these memories vanished when Farías returned with a box, which he placed on the table. He opened it and began taking out old papers: school notebooks, documents, photos. Then he sat down with one of them in his hands, looking at it intently, without glancing up at Ruiz.
When my first son was born, and the nurse and doctor showed him to me in a little crib I had brought from Paris, I didn't understand what I was seeing. He wasn't a child, doctor, but a... thing... a monster, that's it, and it doesn't hurt me so much to say it anymore. He lived for two days, and it was a blessing from God that he died. But before burying him, the night before the short funeral we held for him that morning at the cemetery, I sent for a photographer to come to the house. It might be a habit of my profession, but I needed something concrete to document that boy's time in this world. I was furious with the doctor, and I even scolded Eugenia, as if they were both to blame, except for me. I was prepared to take the doctor to court for what he had done to my son. I never touched the boy, of course, but since I've had his photograph, not a day goes by that I don't look at it, even just a little, or at least think about it.
He reached out to Ruiz. Julio grabbed the photo. There was a dead baby, and the baby's abdomen was open: you could see the intestines, liver, and stomach like in an anatomical slide.
"The boy was born like this, without skin coverings." Those were the doctor's words. You can't see it in the photo, but parts of his back were also missing, and you could see his kidneys and spinal bones.
-I'm very sorry. And tell me, Bartolo, did anyone in your family suffer from any birth defects?
"Not that I know of. My father died when I was two, so I don't have the slightest memory of him alive. Just two very rudimentary photographs. If you like, I can look for them..."
He started rummaging through the box again. He pulled out more papers and folders, one after another.
-Here they are...

Ruiz saw a thin, elderly man, gray-haired and seemingly ravaged by some illness. His face was gaunt, his hair sparse, and his clothes appeared to hang loosely from his shoulders.

- Didn't your mother tell you what she died of?

"He was sick, but it was a taboo subject. She cried every time she remembered Dad, so I grew up almost without being able to ask her anything. For me, he was practically a legend. The only thing she repeated with melancholy, but without crying, was that he loved to eat delicious food, but he lamented terribly that nothing agreed with his stomach."

Farías stopped, looking Ruiz in the eyes.

"Yes, I understand what you're thinking. That's why I left the doctor alone. After that, with the other two, there wasn't even a birth. But now, Julio, I have a lot of hope. Eugenia feels that everything is going well, and I'm sure that curse is over. I trust you, Julio. I'm leaving them both in your hands. You come from Europe, and you've trained with important people. Here, all the quacks know how to do is prescribe herbs or amputate. Don't laugh, it's true. What they don't know, they fix by cutting it off, and problem solved, as if nothing ever happened."

That night they continued talking, and Ruiz went home at three in the morning. In the morning he woke up at his usual time and carried out his scheduled consultations as usual, except he was a little sleepier.

He passed by the mansion in Palermo every day for the next two weeks. Farías had agreed to give him higher fees than usual, and although Ruiz tried to refuse, Farías put his arm around his shoulders and said:

- Shh! You deserve it, but I do ask that you don't mention it to your colleagues.

After each visit, he would linger, conversing with the congressman, but most of the time he was interrupted by the secretary who assisted him in Congress, pacing back and forth between his own desk at home and the study where Farías worked, or by the telephone, which rang repeatedly. Bartolomé Farías had twenty-five draft bills under review, and he thought he understood that the one currently being considered was a requirement to accept a simple written accusation and complaint as conclusive evidence against an accused person. He understood none of this, and only observed that whenever the chamber was in session, there wasn't a moment when Farías, his secretary, or his party colleagues weren't constantly coming and

going from the house with news they brought from Congress or the bar where they met.
Ruiz sat at his desk, watching him shout on the phone, his expressions of fury and astonishment fluttering as he demanded to know what this or that one of his opponents had said. His wife seemed to vanish from his mind, the same woman who remained in a room on the first floor, listening to the same things she had heard since marrying that man: laws she would never understand, because she and their son were beyond all that. He was the man in charge of everything: the laws, the economy, the future of the country. He controlled everything, or at least pretended to. The shouting and banging on his desk were attempts to distract from the errors that, according to him, were disrupting the principles on which the country should be based. But it was in his own home where the facade had to be best constructed: the tragedy hidden in a room on the first floor.
Only a photograph was the narrow channel that served to drain the pain, which sometimes accumulated so much that it took on the ugly smell of rot.
One Sunday at eight o'clock at night, Ruiz heard the telephone ring. It was Farías's maid. She was crying and he could barely understand her.
- Doctor, please come here! Come here!
- Is that the lady, is she in labor?
- Yes, doctor! But she's screaming like crazy and I don't know what to do!
- And Dr. Farías?
He's in Congress. He can't be disturbed...
Ruiz hung up. He grabbed his briefcase and a coat. It would take him an hour to get to the mansion from the boarding house he rented in Saavedra. As the sulky rattled along the muddy and cobblestone streets, he thought that it would be useless to send someone to look for Farías. A whole barrier of secretaries and supporters would prevent Bartolo Farías from interrupting the long speech he had heard him rehearse for many afternoons in his study.
He arrived at the house and went up to Eugenia's room. She was lying with her legs spread and the sheet was covered in blood.
"But why didn't you call me sooner? When did this start?" he asked the maid. The woman was crying and covering her face with her apron. Julio grabbed her arms.
Call the hospital right now! Get an ambulance and nurses!

The woman came out and he heard her talking on the phone while he tried to stop the bleeding. Eugenia was pale, but her arms were tense like planks clamped to the mattress. Her neck was a knot of tendons where he couldn't feel a pulse, and her face was contorted in an expression of pain he had rarely seen.

He filled a syringe and injected a sedative wherever he could. It was impossible to find a suitable vein. Her abdomen was tense and slightly depressed, as if it had partially emptied of all the blood that had stained the bed. He wondered if the fetus was dead, but just the day before he had heard its heartbeat. Eugenia's pain was consistent with a miscarriage: the bleeding, the contractions of her uterus and abdominal muscles.

There was nothing more she could do but wait for help from the hospital, she told herself. But that wasn't true. She had the possibility of doing more than wait, because time, in those cases, was a spiral of death.

She pulled back the sheet and called the maid.

"Listen to me and calm down," he told the woman. "I need you to keep a steady hand, do you understand?"

She nodded and went out to get what Ruiz had asked for: clean sheets and basins of hot water. She stood by the bed, her gaze shifting from Eugenia's face to Dr. Ruiz's, but avoiding looking at what he was doing.

Julio took the scalpel out of the briefcase. He cleaned it in freshly boiled water and brought the tip to Eugenia's abdomen. The sedative had taken effect, but at the cut she screamed and thrashed again.

"Hold her tight!" he shouted to the maid, and she did so, though she closed her eyes to the blood that splattered her face.

The belly of Eugenia Costa de Farías, the daughter of grocers from the Monserrat neighborhood who had died and left her an orphan, the woman who had earned her living doing sewing until a great deputy from Buenos Aires deigned to set his eyes on her, now opened and tore like that of any street dog run over by a cart.

The now-thin belly had emptied after expelling all the blood, and the only thing Julio Ruiz held in his hand—for one hand was enough to hold the thing he had extracted from the ruptured womb—was a simulacrum of a human, a creature shaped like a man but completely red, its muscles moving like snakes in the air. It had no skin, no eyes, but it did have a mouth that began to utter a cry, the only truly human thing about it.

Eugenia raised her head when she heard it, and saw it in Dr. Ruiz's right palm. She didn't scream anymore. She let her head fall back onto the pillow, without closing her eyes, her gaze fixed on the ceiling.
Ruiz covered the child's body with a damp sheet. He sutured Eugenia's abdomen and injected her again.
Half an hour later, she heard the ambulance horses. The nurses came in and saw that everything was done. They took the boy and his mother to the hospital.
The maid had sat down on the bed, all dirty, and was crying.
"I'll call Dr. Farías," he said, and went downstairs to the living room where the telephone was.

Bartolomé Farías continued his speech until two in the morning. No one dared interrupt him; he was in excellent form and at the height of his oratorical powers. His supporters gazed at him with admiration, and even the opposition members of the chamber, who tried to interrupt him, gave up. Twice the secretaries tried to get his attention, and one even mimed a phone call, but the deputy barely took his eyes off the grand hall of the Chamber of Deputies, where he was being observed and listened to with respect.
After the applause and congratulations, Farías managed to slip away from the men in suits and ties who were trying to lead him to the dining room, and he found himself face to face with his personal secretary. Then Bartolo saw old José's face, and he thought he understood. But his smile didn't match the old man's anguish.
He only asked if Dr. Ruiz had taken care of everything.
-That's right, doctor.
Then he got into the sulky, calmer. After two blocks he saw that they weren't going to Palermo's house.
"Where are you taking me?" she asked the driver.
-To the French Hospital, doctor.
He understood. Little by little, he was beginning to understand, but he couldn't shake the images of the faces watching him in Congress, the applause, and the echo of his own voice uttering glorious words for the future of the country. What a triumph that night had been! No one would forget it, and the press would make sure it was remembered.

Ruiz was waiting for him in the lobby. They hugged. The doctor's look of anguish said it all.
-We brought them to the hospital….
"I understand, Julio. I know you've done everything you could. Given the circumstances, what happened with the child was to be expected. May I see my wife?"
Julio Ruiz stopped in front just as Farías took a step towards the corridor that led to the rooms.
Bartolo, I have to tell you what happened. Come on, let's sit down.
"I don't need to sit down, Julio. I feel distressed for the child, but seeing Eugenia will cheer me up; she needs me."
-So it's me who has to sit down.
He walked over to an armchair and sat down with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped. Farías stood watching him. He told him everything that had happened.
The child is alive, I don't understand how, but he's still alive. She died shortly after two o'clock.
The applause resonated in Farías's memory.
What a splendid sound that was, especially for the longest farewells.

Two months after Farías's wife's funeral, the boy was still alive. He was in an isolated room at the hospital. Two or three French doctors and one German doctor had arrived to study him. They left without saying anything; perhaps an article about the strange South American case would appear in some medical journal.
The bill was passed by a large majority, meaning that a simple complaint filed at any local police station would soon be admissible as proof of guilt. The press had been mixed with praise and insults regarding the new law, but the truth was that Bartolomé Farías acquired greater renown than he already had, and speculation began that he might run for the Senate, or even for vice president in the next term.
However, he secluded himself in his Palermo mansion during that entire time, as befitted the image of a husband grieving in mourning. He neither called nor inquired about Dr. Ruiz, who continued his private consultations and his work at the hospital, where he saw Farías's son almost every day. The boy had no name because his father had refused to give him one, nor

had he agreed to have him baptized. The nurses had overcome their instinctive repulsion and treated him like any other child. They called him Justo.
When Ruiz asked why, they shrugged, looking at each other as if searching for the culprit. They simply smiled at each other.
One Friday night he heard the owner of the boarding house calling him.
-Doctor, you have a visitor.
It was José Evaristo, Farías's secretary. He found it very strange that the old man had stepped out of the congressman's usual circle.
"What are you doing here, old friend?" he asked.
The old man sat up in bed; there was only one chair next to the table, and he was frail. He took off his hat and breathed deeply. He was agitated.
- What's wrong with him?
-Nothing, doctor. I practically ran here…
- But did something happen to Bartolo?
The old man became even more nervous the more he prepared to speak.
"Look, doctor. I shouldn't be here. I feel like a traitor. I've been loyal to the doctor since he graduated as a lawyer. I know him like the back of my hand. That's why I don't think what he's doing is right."
- And what is he doing?
The old man stood up and put his hat back on.
-Leave tomorrow, or tonight if you can. They'll come to pick you up on Monday.
- Who?
The police. The doctor didn't tell me anything, but I happened to see the complaint against you. He already drafted it, and it's dated Monday. He already knows what he's accusing you of.
"But please, old man! Don't worry. I've already been sued and I've won because science has proven me right."
"But it's for murder, doctor. My boss accuses you of killing Mrs. Eugenia."
The old man left almost without saying goodbye, looking both ways down the sidewalk.
It was all absurd, Ruiz told himself. Farías was aware of all of Eugenia's and the child's problems. But when he went to bed, he began to think about resentment, which in this case was merely a facade, the opposite of remorse.

Farías couldn't stand himself.
It could not be glory if at the same time it was failure.
One of the walls had to be knocked down.

He didn't flee as they advised. They came very early Monday morning and arrested him. The trial began. They gave him a lawyer who must have been chosen from among his party friends. For six months he was in and out of jail. There was no evidence to consider Eugenia Costa's death a murder, the judges said. But Bartolomé Farías appealed again and again, until, after a year, the maid who had witnessed the operation was sworn in again.
Ruiz never remembered her first name because it was an Indian name, one of those that was hard for her to pronounce. She was the daughter of an Indian woman and a Creole father.
"What is your name?" they asked him at the trial.
"Itza," she had answered, and those present laughed. That was how that name finally became etched in her memory.
Itza's story had changed. For a whole year, she had had to care for the sick boy. She had changed the swaddling clothes around him and learned the names of the baby's muscles and bones. She had overcome her fear, first, then her repulsion, and then the immense sorrow that sometimes made her cry and paralyzed her. She couldn't leave him alone, nor could she be constantly watching him. Until, of the two situations, the second was the less painful.
She had learned to love the boy.
When Farías came in one day to take him away, she asked him what he would do to her.
"You know..." he had replied.
Then she threw herself to the floor and started to cry.
Farías looked up impatiently and kicked her. She was still holding the boy, and the delicate fabrics covering him were falling off.
- Please, please, doctor! Let me have him! I'll take care of him as if he were my own.
- You should have had your own people, you old whore!
- I'll do whatever you want, doctor!
Then the idea arose, like an inspiration that had come to him from the most ignorant creature around him. She was an instrument, he told himself.

-Okay. It's yours, but you have to do something in return.
Itza had changed her testimony. She said that Dr. Ruiz had opened Mrs. Eugenia up, and not knowing how to fix it, had killed her.
When she finished speaking in Dr. Farías's office, in front of the notaries, the order to arrest Dr. Ruiz again was issued. When they went to look for him at the boarding house on Saavedra Street, he was gone. The landlady said that an old man who had been visiting him frequently for the past year had been there a few hours earlier. The old man had gone downtown. Ruiz left with his briefcase; she assumed he was going to his appointments.
They searched for him for several weeks in Buenos Aires. Telegrams were sent to various provinces with an arrest warrant.
Julio Ruiz traveled almost the entire province of Buenos Aires for more than two years. There were many small towns where he could hide. He could no longer work, of course, but he still had his hands and arms to harvest crops, herd cattle, or drive carts. Anything. Later, he went to Mendoza and almost went to Chile, but one day he realized he was too drunk to stay on a horse or mule that would take him across the Andes. He didn't remember how he had become like that. An outcast wandering through fields and remote towns, trying to blend in with the earth to go unnoticed. And nothing was easier to do than become a drunk. Nobody pays attention to them, nobody takes their foolishness seriously. And everyone avoids the filth that covers them.
And one day he woke up, late at night, in a ditch in the city of Paraná. He had no idea when or how he had gotten there. He looked at his reflection in the pooled water, by the light of a streetlamp. He was old, dirty, and thin. Dr. Julio Ruiz, the rising star of La Salpetrierre, had become a wreck. And in a fleeting moment of lucidity, he began to laugh, because he had realized that he was now like the patients who lived in the hospice's corridors. No longer walking, but leaning against a wall, and not wearing a white coat, but a shirt that squeezed his body almost to the point of suffocation.
Later, he didn't know when, he woke up in a room full of bottles, like a sea of glass. Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza found him there.

*

He opened the cabin door and knocked:
- Tomasa!
The voice sounded hollow in the corridor. It was already night. The ship was still anchored and moored to a dock. Everyone was waiting for Captain Mendoza's return.
The old black woman appeared protesting and stood with her hands on her wide waist.
Bring hot water, clean compresses from my cabin, of course. Also the briefcase and the metal box under the bed.
Tomasa looked inside.
-But what happened?
-Nothing, old lady. It's what's going to happen, and you're going to help me.
- So that?
-You'll find out. Do as I say.
When she returned after two or three trips and set everything up on the desk, Julio Ruiz rolled up his sleeves and washed his hands carefully. Tomasa saw great care in his hygiene, but also a great deal of self-absorption.
- Are you going to tell me what you're going to do to Mr. Manuel?
-What the Scriptures command.
Tomasa raised her hands to the sky and said:
- I knew it! It's all Mrs. Natacha's doing! And you obey her like a dog?
-Yes, because I am a dog who needs to eat, and who still wants to live.
-Don't give me that nonsense...he must have said something to her.
Julio Ruiz's hands were already clean, but he continued to mimic Pontius Pilate. Tomasa understood and kept quiet. From that moment on, she would bite her lips when she saw something she didn't like, or her tongue to keep from screaming in horror.
Ruiz sat in a chair beside the bed. He took the wet compresses and cleaned Manuel's body. Tomasa helped him by turning him over in bed. Manuel was awake; she had seen him open his eyes. And Julio knew he had overheard the entire conversation with Natacha. Once he was clean, he injected the sedative into a vein in his arm. He waited half an hour while he took the

surgical instruments out of the box and placed each piece side by side on the table beside him. Tomasa had never seen him work like this; in fact, she had never seen him operate, only treat the men on the ship with powders or stitch wounds.

When she saw him grab the scalpel with his right hand and move his left hand toward Manuel's genitals, Tomasa grabbed his arm. Her face showed pure fear.

- What are you going to do, for God's sake?

"What did you think, Tomasa, when you saw me preparing all this? That I was going to drain a boil, perhaps?" Julio smiled naively, perhaps at the Black woman's willful ignorance. "Did he rape the boy? Did he make him kill himself? Justice is justice: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. We are instruments of God, Tomasa. Do you see these hands?" he said, raising them, and the glint of the scalpel flashed across the Black woman's face. "They are the hands of God, Black woman. Sometimes doctors are the closest thing to God one can find on this earth."

She plunged the blade into Manuel's body. There was a start and a scream, and Tomasa clenched her fists and brought them to her face. Then she looked at Manuel and sat beside him, sometimes holding his head, sometimes stroking his chest, but mostly enduring the force with which she squeezed his hands while the doctor operated on him.

She tried not to see the blood or the doctor's manipulations, and spoke affectionately to Manuel. Although he was sedated, his face underwent a continuous series of metamorphoses: from pain to relief, from anguish to despair, then trembling, and finally exhaustion.

Dr. Ruiz hadn't forgotten his skill after all this time, and perhaps a certain gleam of joy could be seen in his eyes as he did what he had abandoned so long ago. Perhaps it was the blood he knew how to control, the muscles he explored, the veins he delicately dissected. He cut and removed the tissues that caused the disease: that's what Mateo had said in Natacha Krakovsky's almost sacred voice. He couldn't deny it: she was a greater woman than anyone he had ever known. Her intelligence was born of a pain so profound it was boundless, like the roots of an ombu tree. This woman, who didn't belong to America, was the closest thing to a native creature. Impossible to uproot without destroying the land.

The blood kept flowing no matter how hard he tried to stop it. He searched for and stitched up the blood vessels. Then he sutured the skin. He washed the wound. Manuel was completely still by now. Asleep, perhaps dead. The mattress was soaked with blood, as were Julio Ruiz's hands and clothes. He got up and felt the blood on the floor, drying. He checked for a pulse at his wrists, but couldn't find one. Then at his neck. It was weak, but the man was alive.

Was he, however, a man now? Did those reproductive organs define the male of the species alone?

I would leave that to Natacha Krakovsky, the ship's priestess.

She bandaged the wound with the help of Tomasa, who cried as she followed her instructions. When they finished, she saw the container with the removed testicles. She covered it with a clean cloth and asked:

- What are we going to do about this?

Julio was washing his hands, his back to her and the sick man. The light from the oil lamps fell on his back, and his face remained in shadow. His shoulders moved with the gestures of his hands as he washed, but she was sure she had seen him shrug . Then she heard the voice that came from that shadow in which he insisted on keeping his face. For a moment, Tomasa thought of the dark side of the moon.

-Take them to Mrs. Natacha. She'll know how to add them to her collection of profane relics.

THE VARIOUS DEATHS OF THE PARANÁ RIVER

7

Natacha Krakovsky was no longer the same, everyone on the ship noticed, and even Tomasa must have recognized it.
"But what is that woman really like?" the old Black woman would say, sitting on her favorite wooden stool in the kitchen, to the women who helped her and sometimes to the sailors who stayed for lunch. Some simply listened to her because it gave them an excuse to laze around. They didn't know how much longer they would be in that port, but the work of maintaining the ship was almost as much as sailing. In any case, they weren't interested in what the owners did in their private lives. They only obeyed Captain Mendoza's orders and waited for their food and their pay.
"I met her when she showed up at the farm fifteen years ago. Serious, like the countess they said she was, demure and quiet. She won the trust of the strictest aunt in the family, and since then she's done whatever she wanted

with everyone. She made the captain's life miserable; her son has already corrupted him with all his prayers and pious nonsense."
"But don't they say that Mr. Manuel…?" said one of the old men who was listening to her.
"I don't know that," Tomasa interrupted. "I only know that the boy Ariel wouldn't have been what he was, nor would he have died like that, if that woman had raised him differently."
"She's a saint," said another, and the women, who agreed with Tomasa, looked at him, sulking.
"Is it because he dresses in black and prays all day? Or did he win you over too?" the Black woman replied. The others laughed, and the man then turned toward the kitchen door, where Natacha was standing with a container in her hands.
-Good evening, Tomasa. I've come to prepare dinner for our sick man. You can go to sleep, and the others too.
That's what they meant when they said she had changed. Although serious and strict, her language was different.
“He doesn’t fool me,” the black woman thought.
"I won't allow it, ma'am, that's my job." She stood up, wiping her hands on her apron.
"Don't bother, Tomasa. Let me take care of my duties tonight. The ship has been my home for a long time, and I look after my guests myself. If I need you, I'll call you, don't worry."
If the tone had been the same as before, the old woman wouldn't have hesitated to snap back, but this new, hypocritical manner disconcerted her. So she kept quiet and left the kitchen, her gestures revealing her displeasure and annoyance, and constantly glancing back as she left. The others followed her.
Natacha was left alone in the kitchen. She had often cooked for Ariel, because she didn't want to leave her son's delicate stomach in the hands of the Black woman. She remembered how painstakingly she had memorized recipes she had read or been told about in Warsaw. Few of the ingredients they used in Europe could be found in America; not only were the customs different, but also the materials used to prepare food. But after so much time on the farm in Santa Fe, she knew what to expect.

She placed the container on the table. She put on an apron. She searched in the drawers under the table and picked up an empty pot. She placed it in the sink under the water pump and filled it halfway. She carried it to the stove, which never went out completely. She added some more firewood. She opened the container she had brought from her cabin. It was a metal box she had covered with paper so no one would recognize her. Not even Tomasa had noticed, perhaps. And anyway, it didn't matter.

She poured the contents into the pot and listened to the sound as it hit the water. There was nothing more to do but wait, so, without rushing, she walked to the window and looked at the river. Night was falling; in an hour, she would have dinner ready for Manuel. Somehow, she was glad to be able to serve him and help him as she had the last time. The truth was, she hadn't fully recovered since they had held hands on deck. The cross and the man formed a whole that unsettled her, though she couldn't quite put her finger on it. It was ecstasy, she had already experienced that, but it wasn't everything. Then came the depression, or the sinking, if you will. But neither were feelings, only sensations. Moods that could easily give way. The only thing that remained unchanged was Ariel. His angelic face, lacking only a beard to complete his manhood, so like his grandfather's, it was as if he had been brought back after seeing him dead in the dining room of the house in Warsaw. Months later, he had been reborn in another place, and now he had been taken from him once more. And it was then that she saw him in the kitchen. He was sitting as she had seen him so many times before, on a stool, gazing at the river, a notebook on his lap, sketching with a black pencil. Perhaps he was dictating the ingredients? There was no need; the boy wouldn't do that. His bliss was too great for him to do anything that would harm others. His sacrifice had been unique, because he was unique. The conviction to harm oneself is the ultimate kindness toward one's neighbor. Harm cannot cease to exist, and the quality of the person is measured by the choice of the object.

Who had told her that? Or had she heard it before? Was it in some book of scholastic philosophy, or from Aunt Clotilde? Her aunt had become a philosopher after her stroke. Since she could no longer go to Mass, she had arranged for the priest to come to the house almost every day, but he gradually spaced out his visits. One day they argued, and he stopped coming. From then on, Clotilde had adapted her beliefs to resentment, and

the result was a rage that exalted her without her being able to fully express it, because half of her face refused to show it. That was what consumed her, Natacha had told herself many times. Not the pain, but the anger.
That's what moves the world, she had finally come to think, and she said it through gritted teeth, -angry at her powerlessness and angry at the God she had built herself to live by- shortly before her death.
The water had begun to boil. She searched the cupboards for several jars of spices. She seasoned it with thyme and rosemary; she knew Manuel liked them. Then she shredded pieces of chicken on a piece of wood and added them to the pot. It would make a very rich broth, she told Ariel, but the boy kept gazing at the river, always captivated by the images he could never quite replicate.
"The most sublime art is that which imitates what is unseen," she said, stirring the contents of the pot slowly and patiently with her spoon. The smell of the broth filled the kitchen, and she thought she saw a face peeking through the door. If it was Tomasa, she wouldn't dare lose her pride by admitting to spying on her, and if it was someone else, there was no point in bothering.
An hour later, everything was ready. She had removed the preparation from the heat and let it settle for a few minutes. She tasted a sip with the ladle and smiled almost imperceptibly. Not even she knew if it was because of the flavor or some memory it evoked.
She poured some into the tureen and turned to leave the kitchen. Ariel was gone, but she would soon return.

She walked down the corridor toward Manuel's cabin with the same sourness she had displayed not many days before when she left carrying a wrinkled, dirty sheet. Now, as she carried the tureen, she looked as if she were carrying a chalice.
He knocked on the door only once. Julio Ruiz was still caring for the sick man. After eight days, the wound showed no signs of healing, but Manuel remained awake and calm. He didn't complain of pain, but he didn't speak either. His gaze was fixed on the wall opposite the bed, right where the table had stood on which Ariel had rested his hand.

"I'll bring the soup," Natacha said, and a smile so strange appeared on her face that it was like a crude scribble on one of Ariel's drawings. An asynchrony, Ruiz thought to himself, thinking, without quite knowing why, of a clock whose hands pointed to one hour and whose bells announced another. Natacha's face was the clock face with its hands frozen, trapped in a limbo of time, and the bells were perhaps the sound of a joyless laugh. Yes, it was true that he didn't know the reason for this literary image that had formed before his eyes upon seeing Natacha. Even her voice was different, as if she had recovered something lost, as if her son, the only thing she had ever loved, had returned to stay, and in a way that no one could ever take away from him.

She placed the tureen on the table, arranged the pillows behind Manuel's back and head, sat down, and placed two large napkins on him. The sheet was stained with blood, but it didn't matter. She would change it later.

-Go and rest, Julio. I'll take care of it from now on, don't worry.

He heard the doctor snort, more of a sneer, but pretended not to notice. He got up to fetch the tureen and glanced at him. She was now leaning slightly forward, stirring with the ladle, her eyes fixed on Ruiz. He couldn't bear that look, muttered something under his breath, and left without daring to knock.

She sat back down on the bed, pulling the hem of her dress over the stained sheet. In one hand she held the plate into which she had poured some soup, in the other a spoon which she brought to Manuel's mouth. The first time she said:

"Open your mouth, my dear, please. The soup is delicious and will do you good. You must recover, my dear, before your wife returns. I will take care of you, and you will get better. Ariel told me you are a very weak man, and I think you are very sensitive. You should have been a priest, Manuel; that's where your sadness comes from. But now you will have a son, my dear, and yours will be like the one I..."

He hadn't anticipated the lump in his throat, but suddenly he saw the cross on his chest.

-I will help him with his atonement.

He tore off the cross and dropped it on the plate.

Repeat after me: “My body” …

Manuel opened his mouth and took a bite from the spoon as if it were a communion wafer.

*

He had been drifting in and out of sleep and wakefulness ever since he had woken to Ariel's scream and blood. He remembered the walk across the deck back to the cabin, helped by Natacha and Julio. But then time became too vague; only the place remained constant: the bed and the room. His back lay on the mattress where he had spent most of his time. The "Juan Manuel de Rosas" had given him the security that the name implied, as if he had taken it upon himself to become part of his very being, and that was why he had spent so much time in that bed, almost becoming another piece of furniture that had survived from the Napoleonic Regency. He knew that his mind was still bound to certain principles that no longer governed the world, least of all in America. His way of being was incongruous because his way of thinking was rigid. The arguments with Altea stemmed from this dichotomy: she was cold and indifferent, he was obtuse and passionate. Both were doubles, and the result was four personalities playing a game in which they never agreed, and in which they always lost.
Four beings who now returned in his dreams as shadows, or figures represented by others during the day: Julio and Natacha. One who had cared for him since that morning of his desperate awakening, cleaning him, moving him, feeding him, talking to him. And the other, absent until this day when, with her strange voice, she seemed to forgive him. Feeding him spoonfuls of broth, speaking slowly of forgiveness and atonement.
He saw her in front of him, very close, sitting on the bed, sometimes caressing Manuel's knee, unafraid of the blood from the wound that wouldn't heal. With her other hand, she held out the spoonful of broth, urging him to open his mouth, as if he were a child. Perhaps she had done the same with Ariel.

The broth revived him; he felt more awake than with the food Tomasa or Julio brought him. It was true that he was perspiring; the hair on his chest was soaked with sweat, trickling down to the sheets. He felt the cross, whose metal, curiously, cooled him, as if surprised that its alloying point was so much, much higher than the mere heat a man could bear. He saw that Natacha sometimes looked away from his eyes or his mouth and stared at the cross.

She felt no pain when she ripped it off and the broken chain slid down her chest. The cross disappeared into the plate, and she gave him another spoonful.

It was different, because suddenly she felt a tingling in her ears, and as her vision cleared after so many days of restless blurriness, she saw Ariel by the bedside. She thought she understood that mother and son were speaking to each other without moving their lips. Perhaps he had played a part in this reconciliation? Sometimes we are instruments of God's designs, and the role we are given in the theater of the world is not pleasant. Judas Iscariot, for example, the melancholic traitor who never knew how to rid himself of remorse, not even on his own gallows.

The broth soothed him, and the beatific image of mother and son, side by side, brought peace to his soul.

He thought he was dying, because the room was dark, and the clarity so extreme that it was almost like seeing everything on the same plane, a pictorial semblance of paradise. Joseph, the Virgin, and the Child.

But the boy was a teenage angel, and she heard him reproach his mother, suddenly, after her beatific smile, for her harsh attitude of revenge. She responded by putting her spoon down on the plate and looking at Ariel, who stood beside her by the bed. His good hand was holding the stump of his other. He was naked, and his pale, thin chest was that of a sickly, frail angel.

Manuel knew he was witnessing a conversation between two worlds, and that both were present in that moment. Natacha, speaking, scolding Ariel, and the boy, now rebelling for the first time, clutching the chain to repair the broken link. Manuel knew he couldn't do it; it wasn't possible with one hand. He was going to speak, to tell the boy not to worry, please, not to worry. But then he saw him retreat into the shadows of the room. Natacha

had turned back to Manuel and resumed the slow, deliberate movements of the spoon laden with broth.
Ariel, the left hand, reappeared immediately, the dead one in the right hand. One led the other to the stump, and soon it began to move like a dying spider. Manuel saw the hand approaching him, and wanted to cry, but the hand simply retrieved the chain, and together they repaired the broken link.
Natacha watched, with a dry gaze.
When the cross was back on the chain, Ariel approached Manuel, who smelled the dead hand. The boy was so close, his arm around Manuel's neck, placing the cross back on his chest, that it was almost an exact memory of that night.
And when he recovered the cross, the clarity vanished and reality once again became a nauseating breath, the calm began to wrinkle and its fibers intertwined in thick knots, and the pain in his body was no longer even a single pain, but multiple dramas and tragedies that followed one another simultaneously, coordinating the absurd contradictions with the methods of chaos.
Then he began to hear a flapping sound, but he couldn't tell if it happened before or after he saw Ariel retreat into the shadows. Her face, so gaunt, took on the shape of a triangle, and that triangle formed the outline of a bat's face. He saw the beginnings of wings behind her back, and suddenly the whole room was filled with bats.
Ariel was gone, and Natacha had dropped the plate on the floor and was covering her head with her hands.
"Julio, Negra!" she called. She had never gotten used to these invasions. There was never any indication of when they would come, or at least she had never been able to understand it, no matter how many times the sailors had explained it to her.
Manuel couldn't move much. They sat him on the bed, and he stayed like that, because as soon as he tried to move his legs, the wound bled. But he didn't want to move either. Bats circled under the ceiling, bumping into the walls or the furniture, knocking over the lamps, and when it was finally dark, many remained still, hanging from the ceiling or perched on the bed.
And this is what happened. No one came in to close the windows, and Natacha didn't move from her spot. Bats flitted across the sheets, and he

felt they were drawn to the wound. The pain had returned since they had given him back the cross. And the animals approached, timidly at first, and then without fear because he did nothing to scare them away. He felt their legs walking across his thighs, then their teeth on the wound. The wings were as soft as smooth leather. It was a relief, perhaps, that touch of the wings, which were like her hands. Sometimes hands caress, but the face bites.

They were digging and biting, and Manuel's cry was a distressed moan. That was his atonement, he would have told Natacha if he could have, because if he opened his mouth it would only be to scream.

Pain is atonement, punishment is pain.

Is atonement as long as original sin? Then it would never end, just as pain would never end. Its intensity would be different, just as our perception of time is different. We escape time, but not place. The body suffers, and the benefit of the unconscious's anesthesia is paid for with cruel aftereffects later on: impotence, incapacity, remorse, guilt. The four points of the cross.

He heard Natacha scream as light expanded around him. The room was a web of bats, still fluttering around those that remained still. The sheets were a single red stain, and Natacha's skirt and sleeves were a scarlet red that matched her black dress with ecclesiastical precision. Her expression was one of horror, but also of pride.

The lights that Julio and Tomasa had brought were enough to make the bats start flying out the window. Ruiz began to pull out those that were still clinging to the wound, and Tomasa tried to force Natacha to get up, but she screamed and shook her tangled hair.

"Take them out!" he said.

- She doesn't have any in her hair! Come out with me!

They left, their voices sounding almost reconciled for a moment.

Julio Ruiz threw the sheets to the floor. The wound was a dirty, bloody scab, surrounded by a pool of red broth.

"Good God," he murmured, and it was strange to hear him say that.

She saw Manuel's lips, bitten and bleeding, and his face contorted with contained pain.

"Scream, my friend, scream if you want! Don't hold back! Let out all the devils inside you!" she said, almost crying and shaking him by the

shoulders. "How am I going to fix this, how am I going to fix it!" he lamented.
Manuel opened his eyes. Horror was etched on his face, but also a hint of piety consistent with Julio's former idea of God. He raised a hand and pointed at the opposite wall.
"They take care of us," he said.
Ruiz looked towards where some bats were hanging from the wall around the crucifix.
Then he undressed Manuel completely and told him to lie down. The water in the basin wasn't entirely clean, but it didn't matter anymore; the only essential thing was to remove those crusts of clots and grime. He no longer had the energy to call anyone for help. He began to work as he had during the worst moments of the War of the Triple Alliance: using whatever water was available, sometimes simply to wash the soldier's face, or to clean the blood that covered the legs and arms that had to be amputated, and when he did, he found nothing but a mass of broken bones.
He had returned from Europe two years before the end of the war, when the battles were more brutal because the soldiers were already tired and hardly took care of themselves, because many had died and few remained to defend themselves, and because the officers wanted to end it once and for all, and sent their men to the front without thinking much beforehand. He had been overworked, and although he was the chief surgeon at the Ita Ibaté outpost, he worked just as hard, if not harder, than the others. Sometimes he saw some of his colleagues collapse to the floor, and another had to replace them, while the soldier screamed, because there wasn't enough ether for everyone. That battle lasted a few hours for the officers, more than a day for the soldiers, and several days for the doctors. They kept amputating: as soon as the nurses applied bandages, the assistants would remove the patient and place another on the table, and so it went, hour after hour. When the cloths for the bandages ran low, they would take them from the dead before burial, and after washing them, sometimes they would reuse them on the newly arrived.
Ruiz searched the wardrobe and found shirts and linens. He tore them apart and used them to wash Manuel. As soon as he removed the scabs, thick, dark blood gushed out, and it smelled awful. Then Manuel screamed, so loudly that Ruiz raised his head to look at him and smiled. Let him

scream all he wanted, so that the whole ship would know once and for all, so that everyone in the port and the city would know what they had done to him. They: the fastidious Countess Natacha and the eminent Dr. Julio Ruiz. He screamed until he was hoarse, then fainted. The mattress, which had already absorbed too much blood for many days, became soaked again, dripping underneath and at the foot of the bed. Ruiz placed layers of cloth over the wound, waiting for it to clot so he could suture it again. But he knew he couldn't do it alone, and even if he could, Manuel needed to go to a hospital. He hadn't done it before because he knew the risk he took if a policeman or soldier recognized him upon entering the city. He couldn't entrust the task to anyone on the ship either; they were all useless at that sort of thing, and Manuel would bleed to death before they even got there. Still applying pressure to the cloths, she knotted them around his thighs and pelvis. Then she injected him again with a sedative and checked his pulse. It was very low. He only had a slim chance of survival if she got him to the hospital that very night, right now, even. It must be around two in the morning, and that man wouldn't be alive by dawn.

He wrapped Manuel's body in two sheets and a blanket. As he lifted him, Manuel screamed again. Manuel's hand reached toward his face, and Ruiz thought it was to hit him, but it only placed the palm against his cheek and pressed his fingers against his ear and then the back of his neck. He opened his eyes, and Ruiz saw the same expression of Christ in the altarpieces he had seen in European museums.

Holding him in his arms, Ruiz brought his face close to his forehead and kissed him.

"Sorry," he said.

"But why?" Manuel murmured, so quietly it was more of a symbol than a question. Deep in that mouth, Julio Ruiz heard all the screams he had ever heard, even the cries of the dead, like a ceaseless exhalation. And he heard the cries of babies, especially Justo Farías, who had been born without skin, and who, like all righteous people, demanded punishment.

When he came out, many men were blocking the hallway. They stared at him without asking questions, making way for him. Tomasa stopped him.

- Is he dead?

-I'll take him to the hospital.

The old woman grabbed him by his clothes.

"Leave me alone, woman. I know what I'm doing. You take care of the lady; I've never seen her like this before, and she might hurt herself."
The black woman almost laughed, but this was not the occasion.
-Not even Mandinga could kill her...but go ahead, go ahead, and do what you have to do to fix this...
Ruiz didn't look at her, he just kept walking. They had already prepared the boat and helped him get Manuel out. Then he rowed the short distance to the dock, tied it to a pillar, and lifted the sick man ashore. His legs ached, but he was able to get up himself and the other man, and they started walking through the port in the middle of the night. A policeman's shack had its lights on, but he heard snoring and walked past it. The few houses in the port were dark. Dogs barked at him, and the occasional flashlight flickered on for a few seconds. He needed a cart, but he didn't dare wake anyone at that hour if he wanted to remain as inconspicuous as possible.
Half an hour later he had arrived in the town of Santa Lucía. He knew that the old Jesuit convent had been converted into a children's hospital. He knew the old doctor, Martín Ibáñez, who had been the director after Ruiz traveled to Europe, because he was a friend of his father. From his father's letters, he had learned how Ibáñez had died: the father of a sick boy had stabbed him. As far as he knew, the doctor had been in agony for a week, and during all that time he had heard the construction of the gallows on which the man was hanged. The governor himself had come to witness the ceremony, and afterward he wanted to visit Ibáñez, but he had to spend the rest of the day and night at a party meeting and the obligatory dinner. In the morning, he was told that the doctor had died. He didn't go to either of the funerals, which, in any case, were held in the same cemetery at the same time. The hanged man's body waited a whole day at the police station, and when they finally obtained permission from the curia to bury him in consecrated ground, the doctor's body arrived in another cart. One arrived in a wagon pulled by a single old horse, with the gravedigger and a priest. The other arrived in a two-horse cart, followed by the bishop and Dr. Ibáñez's twelve children. His wife was too distraught, they said, to attend. The twelve boys walked in two lines, seemingly arranged by age and height. They walked with their heads bowed, and only the two youngest gazed with curiosity and fear at the landscape of gravestones. Behind them walked some nurses and colleagues of the doctor, and further back, some

residents of Santa Lucía. The graves were twenty meters apart. One was covered in flowers, the other bare. One had a wooden cross, the other a headstone paid for by the municipality and carved that very morning. The priest's sermon at the hanged man's grave lasted five minutes, and then he went to the other grave, next to the bishop's, where brief speeches followed the prayers for the dead. Ruiz's father had taken great care to describe all of this to him because he had greatly admired Dr. Ibáñez. He lamented the manner of his death and the execrable pomp of his village funeral. A year later, the war came, and the soldiers began to arrive.
Now that he was by the entrance, he saw the old Jesuit building with its dark facade of arches and tiles, and the bell tower hidden in the late night. He paused to catch his breath. He hadn't checked it since leaving the ship, and although he heard low moans, he hadn't heard them in the last hundred meters. As he took a breath, he felt something pointed at his head. Looking up, he saw the barrel of a rifle pointed at him.
"What's wrong, buddy?" said the policeman.
-I've brought my friend…
The other one approached to touch him.
- Are you sure he's alive? Come on, old man, a doctor will take a look.
The two of them brought Manuel in, placed him on a stretcher, and took him to a room. A doctor in a dirty white coat came out of another room, rubbing his eyes.
"What's going on here?" he began, but upon seeing the body, he looked at Ruiz. "But what happened to him? Yes, yes, I see now. Who are you?" he asked, putting on his glasses and looking at Ruiz suspiciously.
-I'm a friend, you'll see he was castrated, I don't know how to tell you…
"Go see the officer. We'll see if anything can be done about this man." And he dismissed him, calling the nurses, who helped him carry the stretcher to a room at the end of the hall.
The lamps only illuminated about ten meters, and he couldn't even see the walls to his sides. The policeman stood behind him and told him to walk toward the counter, where a nurse was waiting for him under three lamps hanging from the ceiling.
- What is the patient's name?
-Manuel Menéndez Iribarne.
The nurse looked at him with a frown.

- Foreign?
-Spanish.
- And where does he live?
"I don't know," Ruiz said in a very low voice.
Didn't you hear me?
-He doesn't live here, he came to visit me a few days ago and stayed with me.
-Please give me your name and address.
He did not answer immediately; the nurse loaded the pen into the inkwell and waited a while, ready to write.
"Julio Ruiz," he said. "I have a shack by the river, you'll understand, I don't have a job."
The woman must have written "vagrant" on the paper and assumed the supposed friend was another one of them, and that it had all probably happened during a drunken brawl. She called the police officer, they looked at the newly filled-out form together, and exchanged glances.
“Come with me,” the policeman said. He gently took hold of his elbow, as if helping him walk to the wall opposite the counter, and told him to sit down. Then he stood beside him for a long time. Every now and then he heard movements at the end of the corridor, sounds he recognized: the noises of an operating room. Clattering metal, angry voices, the occasional brief laugh, but above all, he caught the smell of ether and medications. He saw the door open from time to time as a nurse in an apron, mask, and cap went in and out.
He had noticed the policeman shifting his weight from one foot to the other every now and then; he must be tired. Then he walked over to the counter and started talking to the nurse. They whispered for a while, smiled at each other. Then she grabbed some papers from the counter and left him alone. She had to go on her rounds, so only the man remained, so brightly lit that he could hardly see Ruiz sitting by the wall, where only the tips of his muddy boots were visible. He stepped back, moving his feet out of the glare of the light. He began to shift on the wooden stool toward the door.
The policeman picked up the phone. At first, he couldn't hear anything, but on the third ring, the caller started speaking loudly, the connection kept cutting out, or the voice on the other end was very low. Where was he calling? Santa Fe? Buenos Aires? He couldn't make anything out, even

though he heard his name several times. Then the policeman hung up abruptly and looked at him, but he wasn't really looking at him because he couldn't see him. Then he ran up to the wall, and when he touched him, he said:
"Stay where I left you, old man. Otherwise, I'll take you to the police station." And he sat down next to him.
Ruiz rubbed his face; he wanted to cry. He could have slipped away while the other man was talking, so why hadn't he taken the chance? What business did he have of knowing what the other man was finding out on the phone, if it was so obvious? He knew, in that instant, that the alcohol and the misery he'd endured had taken their toll on his brain cells. He'd already known that the day Mendoza rescued him and took him to the ship. But the good food and the peace he'd enjoyed since then had deceived him, as everyone is deceived by the fragile facade of prosperity. Manuel's operation was the clearest sign that he was no longer a caricature of the doctor he'd once been, and the missed opportunity that night confirmed that he was now nothing more than a fool who didn't even deserve the pity of the worst of men.
The back door opened, and she heard the doctor's footsteps in the hallway. The ceiling lights illuminated him every few feet. First she saw him in his cap and apron, then with his hair disheveled and his hands untying the knots of the straps, and finally with his apron open and the hairs on his chest glistening with sweat.
"Are you a relative or a friend?" he asked. The policeman made him stand up.
"Friend," he said.
-I imagine there's no one closer.
Ruiz shook his head.
-Someone needs to stay and look after him in the room.
The doctor exchanged a glance with the policeman, and they both spoke in hushed tones.
"You'll have to stay. I'll tell the nurse."
The doctor went into another room, and the policeman, still holding his elbow, led him to Manuel's room. He saw him in bed, immaculately dressed in white. He looked around and realized how much he missed hospitals, even one like this, set up in a former convent. But weren't convents also

hospitals for the soul? The souls of the priests must still be wandering these corridors and rooms. A cross on the wall at the head of the bed was very similar to the one Manuel wore on his chest. But it had been taken down and was now on the bedside table.
"Sit down, friend. If you need anything, ask the nurse." Then he left, and footsteps could be heard heading towards the reception area.
If only he could slip away into the gloom of the corridors, he thought. But then a nurse he hadn't seen before came in. She was older and heavier, certainly more senior than the one at reception. She looked at the patient, checked the bandages and bedclothes, and took his pulse.
"Is he going to get better?" Ruiz asked.
- That's something the doctor has to tell you. What is your relationship to the gentleman?
-A friend.
- Did you do this to him?
He didn't answer. She shrugged.
-I can just imagine, you get drunk and kill each other.
She looked at him for a moment, waiting for the response she was used to, but faced with the silence, she probably thought that Ruiz was more stupid than the others.
He went out and left the door ajar. As soon as he peeked out, he saw that the policeman had returned and was sitting in front of the door, his right foot resting on his left knee, and in his hands the baton he held first on one side and then on the other, playing with it as if distracted.
She sat down beside the bed. She looked at Manuel and knew he was in good hands. If he lived, it would be thanks to the people at this hospital; if he died, it would be solely his own doing.

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The officer was on duty at the hospital every day, all day long. Sometimes they came to relieve him on Sundays, sometimes on other days of the week,

even some nights. But he never knew when. The work wasn't much: helping patients in and out, the occasional drunk to restrain, sometimes a couple of thieves, or a few fights between women, and plenty of rabid dogs to kill. Sometimes he was very tired, because he took his job seriously; that's how he'd been raised at home. Maybe because he was still very young, as Commissioner Santángelo told him, but mostly because he needed to work and didn't want to get caught making a mistake. Gálvez did his best and tried to stay awake and alert, which was more difficult, for most of his shifts.

Like tonight, for example, sitting across from the door of the room where a possible murderer lay, his eyes kept closing, even though his hands were automatically fidgeting with his baton. He trusted his ears more on those occasions, but they had failed him many times before. He thought about the conversation with the commissioner half an hour earlier. Communication was as poor as ever, and he had to shout. Watching the suspect from behind the counter, or trying to see him in the shadows by the wall, he hoped he was stupid or deaf enough not to realize they were talking about him. In reality, his mind was torn between two very different thoughts: his duty that night, which was taking on a different form and had made him doubt how his boss would see him, and on the other hand, the thought of Camila, which made him ill. He couldn't get her out of his mind or his body; they smiled and talked, and her scent excited him. When he saw her walk down the hall, he couldn't stop watching her, and every time he tried to touch her legs, she ran away. Yet, he always thought he saw her turn around for a moment, a smile that seemed to invite him to chase after her. When would his next shift end so he could be with her? Camila had rest hours; he didn't know his, and most of the time they didn't coincide. Officer Gálvez took his job very seriously, which is why he was worrying so much about the call to the station.

- This is Corporal Manolo Gálvez, commissioner!

"Who the hell is this?" he heard from the other end of the line. Santángelo was sleepy and grumpy. It was 3:30 in the morning.

-I'm sorry to bother you, commissioner, but it is my duty to inform you of an incident here at Santa Lucía Hospital.

The commissioner cleared his throat and started cursing again.

-Okay, what the hell happened?

-Two individuals entered, one brought the other wounded, almost half dead.
- And you're bothering me at this hour of the night for that?
-Excuse me, commissioner, but I suspect that the same person who brought him here wounded him, and look, commissioner, he cut off his... do you understand?
"What are you talking about?! Oh, I see! Why don't you speak clearly instead of like a little girl? And are they dangerous?"
"They don't look right to me. One is dying, and the other is emaciated..."
- And couldn't you wait until tomorrow to tell me, damn it?!
Gálvez swallowed.
"I'm very sorry, Commissioner, but I was told to report anything I thought was important immediately. And when the guy dies, we're going to have a murder here."
There was a pause on the other side. In Santa Fe, Commissioner Santángelo must have sat down to sip some cold mate that had been left on the table since the night before.
"Alright, Corporal. With officers like you, the country has a great future, my friend. Give me the names." When Gálvez finished, he said, "Keep the guy detained and I'll await orders."
He had already hung up when the corporal was about to ask when his relief would arrive. He thought of Camila, who was doing her rounds, and suddenly realized he could no longer see the tips of the old man's boots. He ran to the bench by the wall. Yes, he was still there.

Commissioner Álvaro Santángelo hung up the phone and cursed the corporal. "That son of a bitch looks like a fucking faggot," he muttered aloud. "It must be the ghosts of the priests they say live in the hospital."
The commissioner lived at the station. He was fifty-five years old and had given up on any ambitions since taking the post ten years earlier. It must have been his bad temper, several confusing incidents with dead prisoners in his cells, and surely the time they found him with two or three women from the town at the station. One of them, it was rumored, was the mayor's wife. He was wearing a t-shirt and underwear, his sparse hair disheveled, his eyes crusty. Suddenly, his gaze fell upon the notices and announcements plastered on the wall behind his desk. All old and expired,

but he didn't bother taking them down anymore. And then he saw one that must have been almost ten years old. "Doctor Julio Ruiz." They'd been looking for him for a long time; he couldn't remember what the guy had done. Such a common name, she'd often thought when her eyes happened upon that sign. Never before had there been a single one in all this time, and now there was one, and it was in a hospital.

He scratched his crotch, thinking that maybe it would be worth calling the colonel in the morning. He went back to the bedroom, took a sip of the remaining liquor from the bottle, and put his trousers on. He went to the kitchen and put the kettle on. He returned to the telephone and picked up the receiver. He remembered he couldn't recall Colonel Gómez's number and opened the desk drawer. He rummaged through papers again and again; the water had already boiled. He went to get the mate gourd and the kettle, prepared a cup, and drank it. He rummaged through the papers again until he found his address book, which was nothing more than a pile of torn papers. He realized he couldn't see a damn thing and went back to the bedroom to get his glasses. He rummaged through the still slightly damp sheets; lately, when he masturbated, he still had traces of incontinence. There were fewer and fewer pleasures left in life, he told himself; even the prostitutes didn't want to come anymore because they complained that he beat them. And what did they expect him to do if they were the ones to blame for his erections lasting less and less time?

He finally found his glasses and put them on. He tried several times before getting a signal, and then he fell asleep. His arm lay across the table, the receiver in his hand, his head resting on his arm. At seven in the morning, the cleaning woman came in; she didn't bother to wake him, only the noise she made with the buckets and by moving the chairs.

-Good day, commissioner.

Santángelo ignored him. He rubbed his eyes, cursed the cold mate again, and reheated it. While he waited, he put on his uniform jacket in the dormitory and returned to the table. Another mate and another attempt to call. Finally, he got through.

-Good morning, Mrs. Gomez. I'm sorry to bother you so early. Is the colonel available?

The woman, in response, simply put the phone down and he waited. He heard some coughing and a morning argument between husband and wife.

Speak!
-Good morning, Colonel. I am Commissioner Álvaro Santángelo, from Santa Fe, sir. I am bothering you because I feel it is my duty to inform you about something that you recommended to me with special care some years ago.
- What the hell are you talking about?!
-It seems we found Dr. Julio Ruiz.
There was a pause on the other end of the line; the colonel must have been trying to remember.
- Oh, really? And where, what have they done with him? Are you sure it's the same one?
-At Santa Lucía Hospital. They couldn't confirm the description because we don't have it, but they brought in another guy with his testicles cut off…
- And is the other one still alive?
-That's what I've been told, but maybe it won't last long.
The colonel paused again.
-So he cut off one of his testicles and the other is still alive…he could very well be a doctor. Keep him in custody and await orders.
And she hung up. Santángelo had to get up from his chair because the woman was pushing him to wash the floor.

Colonel Anastasio Gómez hung up the telephone by his bed. His wife was already up, grumbling about the subordinates who were bothering her so early. He had flinched indifferently, but while still holding the phone in one hand, he patted his wife's bottom with the other. She ignored him and left the room. That had been the reason, perhaps, for the pause he'd made while talking. When he hung up, he thought how strange it was to come across Ruiz's case after so many years. The last time he'd heard anything about him, he'd been told he was a drunk, bouncing from town to town like any other vagrant, and that was why they couldn't find him. He would send a letter to Congressman Farías later.
He got out of bed and stretched. He opened the French doors that overlooked the park. Beyond the grove of trees lay the ravines of San Isidro. He was tall, with blond hair that was turning gray. He was forty-seven years old, and he ran his hand over his chest and abdomen. He kept in shape because he rode horses every day, and on weekends he played pato. He still enjoyed making love to Delia, even after more than twenty

years. They had had five children; two had died in the war, and he had saved the third at his wife's behest—Congressman Farías had managed to do it. Their two daughters were married and lived, one in Córdoba and the other in Uruguay. The two of them lived almost alone on the estate. Lautaro, the youngest, was studying, or so he said, in Buenos Aires, but he was a good-for-nothing who did nothing but ask for money to stay stuck in his endless first year of law school.

They had breakfast in the park; it was sunny and the morning was cool.

"Who was it?" Delia asked.

- Who? Oh! A police commissioner from Santa Fe. About the Ruiz case.

-You're distracted, is it important?

-It has to do with Farías, my love.

-Then, yes.

There was no need to say more. Bartolomé had saved their only remaining son, even if it was a shot in the dark. He'd settle down eventually, she said, always doting on him and making excuses for him. The colonel remained silent, but he expected her to call him one morning for help. He knew his son's tone by now, somewhere between absentminded and subtle; hearing him on the phone seemed more sincere than looking him in the face. But, well, he was alive, and one day he would give them a son to carry on the family name. Perhaps just a simple Gómez.

Like that of so many Ruiz, except that perhaps they had finally found the end of the thread.

That morning he went to the village to send a telegram to Buenos Aires. He didn't want to call the congressman directly; he knew he was in the middle of his campaign, and besides, many years had passed. He didn't know if Farías would act officially or unofficially.

“We found him in a town in the province. I await your order.”

That was all it took for Farías to understand.

When she returned to the fifth house, she went into her study to answer some letters. Delia came in to bring her a snack.

- Any news, dear?

-Nothing, my love.

They shared a brief kiss, holding hands, and then she let go so he could continue writing.

Bartolomé Farías was just over fifty years old. Since his wife's death, he had renewed his seat in parliament once, and now he would try again. The truth was, his son was making his life a living hell. That monster was still alive, against all the doctors' predictions. After all, what did they know, those quacks? They had all done nothing but kill their children and their wives. And they had left the last one alive to become their torment.
He lived upstairs in the house in Palermo, locked up all day. The maid who had taken on the responsibility of raising him was also tired. She still didn't complain, because she knew she had given false testimony, but what mattered most to her was what his father would do with the boy. During those ten years, Justo had learned to walk. A crust of rough skin had formed on his body that sometimes lasted for many months, and then it would begin to peel. At first, it was white and fresh as butter, then it would dry out and turn purple, and finally it would begin to smell bad, making it impossible to enter the room without holding your nose. The woman cleaned him and removed the crusts as the doctors had taught her, but she no longer asked for advice. She knew him better than anyone. She had been hit by the boy, who grew tall and impulsive. He didn't speak, of course, only grunts and moans. No one knew if he had eyes, and instead of eyelids, there were two crusts as hard as bone that never changed. He walked hunched over the entire room, wanting to get out.
Farías had often thought of sending her and the boy far away, to the countryside, and perhaps, at some point, when everyone had forgotten, the boy could disappear. But when the press informed almost the entire country about Congressman Farías's son, he didn't dare do it. Suddenly, he saw how public opinion had changed. His colleagues treated him with a certain deference born of pity. He would have told them to go to hell, but he realized that what the voters thought was more important, and the image the press had created of him had allowed him to successfully return to politics.
His advisors had suggested taking pictures with the boy, playing with him or teaching him something, sitting across from the desk. But he hated sensationalism, and besides, he couldn't stand Justo's smell or appearance. The boy was shouting, as he did every morning. And he could hear him despite the hallway, the staircase, and the doors that separated him from his study. The pig-like shouts grew louder and quieter as his secretary

opened and closed the door, bringing him a telegram. The old man who had helped Ruiz escape had died in an asylum.
He read the text and leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on the paper, lost in thought. He remembered Julio Ruiz's face back then, the face that had represented the trust he and his wife had felt. The clean-shaven face of a serene and wise doctor had fostered intimacies he had confided in no one else. He wanted to see him again, but what for? Why did he want to see him so diminished? Or perhaps because he missed that trust, forever lost? It was true that Ruiz had let him down, but was that entirely true? Be that as it may, he felt nothing more than a renewed need to have him across from his desk, knowing that their shared silence while he worked and Ruiz read was a bond he had never had before and would never have again.
Justo's screams stopped. Why had he been left with that name the nurses had given him? Justo represented no kind of justice, neither for the boy himself nor for those around him. And where was the justice he deserved, or what was it? The men in the Chambers only made laws that were nothing more than flimsy charades of justice, mere weak ropes that everyone clung to until they snapped.
Bartolomé Farías had a high probability of being re-elected, and there was even talk of him running for president shortly afterward. He was experiencing a resurgence, and it was Justo Farías who was sustaining him. He no longer needed anyone else.
He picked up the receiver and asked to speak to Colonel Gómez. The ringtone rang several times until a woman answered.
- Delia? It's Bartolo, darling.
-Ah, Bartolo, we were talking about you today, what a pleasure to hear!
-Same here, Delia. Is Tasio nearby?
-Yes, I'll call him now. Sending you lots of love.
-Same to you, dear.
He drummed his fingers on the table, the shouting resumed.
-Hello Bartolo, my dear old friend. I hear things are going very well for you, congratulations!
-Thank you Tasio, I received your telegram.
The colonel paused very briefly, probably to ask Delia to leave him alone.
-That's right, my friend.
- Is it confirmed?

-As far as I know. Of course, this will be verified in the field.
They both fell silent, waiting for the other's voice, and question and answer sounded at the same time.
- What do we do?
-Shoot him.
Farías looked around his desk. He got up and opened the door; no one had heard. He went to the window; no one was nearby. He glanced at the chair where Ruiz usually sat and thought he saw him with an anatomy book in his hands, looking up every now and then, just like he did when he heard him berating on the phone while he worked.
He went back to the phone; the colonel was still waiting.
- Any questions, Tasio?
-None, Bartolo. If I don't call you, you know.
-Okay, Tasio. Give Delia a kiss from me, and a big hug for you. Tell your son to call me; maybe we can still get him back on track.
She hung up. The figure in the chair was still there, and it wasn't about to disappear.

Around six o'clock the next evening, it began to drizzle. It was cold, the sky overcast with a porcelain-like appearance tinged with gray and black. Even darker clouds could be seen from the north. Corporal Gálvez remained at his post in the chair in the hallway, but he had gone to the bathroom several times, and each time he returned, he opened the door to check that the old man was still inside. The nurse had arrived for her shift earlier and approached him with a chair and a tray. She had brought him afternoon tea, she said, to share together. He smiled, and they began to chat over mate and fried cakes she had prepared at home.
"It looks like a really bad storm is coming," she said. "People in the city are saying it's already raining a lot up north, and the river is rising."
The corporal dismissed all of that. It was better this way, he told her; perhaps she would then have to spend the night in the hospital, and they could be closer. She laughed, burying her face in his shoulder.
Occasionally, a cough could be heard from the room, drowned out by their futilely suppressed laughter.
It was already dark, and they turned on the hallway lights. There was clapping from the entrance, and Camila went to investigate. She returned a

while later with a robust man with thick, dark hair and beard. Gálvez saw that he was carrying a rifle slung across his chest. She stopped and bowed. Even though he was in civilian clothes, she knew he was the man she had been waiting for.
-Corporal Gálvez, sir.
-At ease, Corporal, this is Major González. Where is the detainee?
-In this room, sir.
He opened the door and looked out. He called Ruiz and he came out into the hallway.
"Let's go outside," said the older one.
Ruiz and Gálvez followed him down the corridor to the door. They went outside. The countryside around the hospital remained dimly lit, without glare. The rain had let up, but the smell of grass and damp earth lingered. They walked only a few meters, turning a corner of the building. The older man looked around, as if choosing a particular spot.
"This is fine," he said, and turning to Ruiz, he asked:
- Are you Dr. Julio Ruiz, son of Bernardo Amado Ruiz and Genoveva Beatriz Aranguren?
"That's right, sir," he replied.
- Do you know why I've come here?
-I can imagine, sir.
Gálvez stood at attention, with his hands behind his back, not looking at either of them, his gaze perhaps fixed on a tree twenty meters away or on a dog lying in its shade.
"Corporal, sell the detainee," he ordered, while checking his weapon.
Gálvez hadn't moved yet; perhaps he was thinking about what fabric to use. All he had was his handkerchief. However, his eyes didn't show that; in fact, he was trying not to think.
"Major, I ask that you grant me one last wish," said Ruiz.
González rested the butt of his rifle on the ground.
-Okay, what do you want?
-Write a letter.
-Corporal, bring paper and a pencil.
Gálvez rushed back into the hospital. It took him longer than necessary to find something that was always within easy reach on the reception desk. Meanwhile, the two of them remained silent, staring at each other as if all

they had to endure was the annoying, irritating drizzle. Expressionless, their faces were like two rocks, or two laws. For a moment, Ruiz seemed to be crying. Perhaps he saw Farías's shadow, shaped by the rain in the space between him and the older man. But they were only raindrops trickling down his face.
Gálvez returned with a sheet of paper and a pencil. Ruiz took them and turned around to lean the sheet against the wall, and began to write.
They waited a minute, maybe two.
-That's enough, Ruiz. Turn around.
Julio Ruiz obeyed and returned the paper to Gálvez.
-Corporal, sell the prisoner and put him with his back against the wall.
Gálvez took a handkerchief from his pocket. His hands were trembling. Ruiz sensed the clumsiness with which he tied the knot, but what he noticed most was the scent of the fabric. It had the faint perfume of a woman. Perhaps the nurse had borrowed it from the corporal and used it to dry her forehead or cheek that very afternoon when she arrived in the drizzle.
Ruiz smiled for a moment, but it soon vanished. The corporal had barely moved from his side when he heard the shot. He hadn't even managed to resume his attention position, nor had he fully lowered his arms after tying the knot.
The body was seated against the wall, one leg bent and the other extended, its arms in the position of a broken cross. The head hung to the right. In the chest was a large, red hole that was gradually turning dark.
Gálvez watched all this, and took the paper out of the pocket where he had put it. He began to read it, but the older man shouted:
- Throw that shit away!
The corporal now stuttered when he spoke:
-It's for Captain Hurtado de Mendoza, Major.
González put the rifle back in its holster and stretched out his arm, without moving, to approach where the corporal and the dead man were.
Give me that!
The corporal walked the two meters that separated them, stumbling over one of the body's feet.
González began to read:

“My dear captain, by the time you read this, I will already be dead. I only want to entrust my son to you, the one I had in Concordia with that woman I told you about once. Take care of him and make sure he studies my profession. Don't think that what you did for me was in vain. Now they're killing me like a dog, but sober.”

He folded the paper in four and put it under his jacket.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "Bury the prisoner."

Then he turned around and walked towards the village.

The corporal went back to the hospital and returned with a shovel. He dragged the body toward the nearby tree. He began to dig; the earth was soft, which was good. Ruiz had already caused too much trouble.

When he finished, he threw the body in and began filling the grave again. Then he stood with his arms crossed on the shovel handle. He muttered something and made the sign of the cross. Afterward, he walked away, hunched over. His mind slowly shed the image of the dead man, and another soft, white face blended into the sleep that was already lulling him. He disappeared through the hospital door.

There were a couple of flashes of lightning and claps of thunder that echoed through the silence. The earth piled up in the grave would gradually compact. In the morning no one would notice it, and even that same night there would be no trace of it left.

The dog, who had seen everything from the shade of the tree, raised its head when it heard the shot, then lay down again. When the man finished digging, the dog got up and began sniffing in the disturbed earth, circled around several times, lifted a paw, and urinated. Then it went on its way.

*

She heard the gunshot. It sounded as if it had hit the wall of the room. She opened her eyes with a start that shook her aching body. She didn't protest

because the nurse was straightening the sheets. She was startled too and looked toward the window.
Was it possible they killed him right there? Because Manuel knew what it was about; he had overheard the conversation between Julio and Natacha. What other motive could there have been for such a shooting?
"They killed him," he said in a very low voice.
The nurse looked at him, glancing up from the notes in her notebook.
"They must have killed that dog that's always wandering around."
However, it didn't sound convincing.
Then Corporal Gálvez entered the room and searched for her with frightened eyes. He approached her and hugged her. She looked at Manuel, as if ashamed.
"Let's go out," she said in a very low voice.
She heard them whispering in the hallway for almost five minutes. Then his footsteps faded back toward the entrance, but there was a third footstep as well, as if he were using something metal for support. She went back inside, and the voices of other patients could be heard from the adjoining rooms.
"Did they kill Dr. Ruiz?" he asked, because he needed to talk after so many days of silence.
She nodded, drying her eyes.
"And in the end, what's it to you? Didn't it almost kill him?" And he left again.
In the hallway, she was now talking to other nurses, and she heard the doors of other rooms opening and closing rapidly. Manuel looked at the cross on the bedside table and stretched to reach it. His entire lower body was wrapped in bandages, and beneath them he felt a shell that didn't hurt, but gave the sensation that it might creak and break at any moment. He remembered the smell of his own blood and its sticky dampness on the mattress and sheets. Perhaps he was transforming into an insect, and the metamorphosis was slowly ascending, replacing his flesh, blood, and bones with cartilage and membranes. When the transformation was complete, perhaps he would wake up one morning to find himself in bed like a giant cockroach, upside down. Then Natacha and Altea wouldn't recognize him, and above all, José wouldn't dare approach him anymore. Or perhaps he would? Perhaps he wished to protect that defenseless insect, to lock it in a

glass case and observe it every day, to caress its thick back and fragile legs, combing its antennae as if they were two long hairs, searching for its eyes: the eyes of his brother Manuel lost in the insect's head.
He grasped the cross and began to fasten the chain behind his neck. Raising his arms was a triumph of his will over the pain, but he managed it. He wouldn't look or touch himself under the sheets; he was afraid of two things: the bandages damp with urine and blood, or the shell forming beneath them. He remembered the bats from the other night, and that if they returned, they would make an unforgettable feast of him. What more could they desire, lords of the night, than to find that giant insect and feast upon it at their leisure? No one would enter the room. And when the nurse or doctor came in the morning, they would see only a pair of antennae, perhaps a fragment of a leg, and the sheets stained with the thick black mucus of the discarded insect.
He gripped the cross tightly. If he had studied to be a priest, as his family had intended, he would now be in the center of a cathedral, before an altar, in his black cassock. He could see himself from the high ceilings and stained-glass walls: a lone man dressed in black, so small in the distance, he looked like an insect.
He opened his eyes at the revelation of this thought.
He beat his chest, muttering *mea culpa, mea culpa* … until the chanting became an endless prayer that didn't need to be uttered.
He looked at the cross on the wall. His neck ached, but that was okay: life is pain. The dark-skinned Christ on that crucifix was revealing precisely this to him: the color black inverts colors, absorbs them, and cancels them out. Black is always the same, black doesn't change, black prefers pain because it hides it deep within, as profound as darkness.
Two or three cockroaches walked across the floor of the room, climbed onto the baseboard, and ascended the wall. One reached the ceiling and seemed to be looking down at it as if from the top of a cathedral. The other two stopped beside the crucifix, one on each side, like the thieves condemned with Christ.
If Natacha could see all of this, she would enjoy it as something of her own making. She understood it, and that's why she was so eager to fight against Manuel's lustful side, against that half of him that was his brother José. She understood him, and that's why she had hurt him from the first day they

shook hands. If they had met at another time and in another place, their black dresses would have taken the form of two wings spread around their heads, which, joined together, would have formed a single, delicate, angular face.

Then he knew what he had to do.

Being in that room was more than a waste of time, it was blasphemy. I had to get out and pick up the scraps of pain and misery.

He heard the thunder and the rain that had begun to pour down on the building. Some doors banged in the wind, letting in the scent of the cold, heavy rain. Shadows entered through the doorway of the room. They weren't women, they weren't nurses. They were leaves torn by the wind, and they were insects fleeing the storm, taking refuge in that room as if in a great womb that began to throb with the disjointed rhythm of despair.

He threw off the sheets. Yes, he told himself, he was a mummified being. The bandages were blackened, hardening as the secretions dried. He had to get up before it became impossible again. He wasn't going to behave like he had on the ship, where he had let guilt become a destructive organism, a disease taking shape within his own body. Now he had to use that guilt as a force he could wield. He wasn't going to destroy, but rather vindicate others. What little life he had left didn't deserve to be lived as an instrument or object of scorn. He already wore a crown of thorns, but that same crown made him king of his own guilt. The punishment of others was nothing compared to the true punishment of remorse.

But even without knowing what she was going to do, she got up with all the effort she could muster. No one was going to pay any attention to her futile groans. The thunder and rain had everyone busy, some tending to the fearful sick, others searching for cracks in the roofs and placing buckets on the floor.

He stood up, leaning on the table beside the bed. He put on a robe to cover his nakedness. He walked with short steps, and everything went well until he reached the door of the room. He peered into the dimness. The lamps hanging from the ceiling had been extinguished by the gusts of wind or the seeping rain. He heard moans at the end of the corridor. He listened intently; it was either someone dying, or it was the corporal and the nurse making love that rainy night. Yes, Manuel thought. Those two deserved that pleasure and that rest. Both were beyond any resentment. They were

young and longed for each other, and above all, they had done their jobs very well, one caring for the living and the other accompanying the dead. He went out into the hallway and walked slowly, now certain he wouldn't be disturbed at that hour of the night, when the rain continued its pretentious deluge, keeping the world still in its places: the animals in their burrows and the men in their rooms. That night belonged to the dominion of water and plants, of collapsing trees and the rising river, of the ever-increasing carpet of leaves, nourished by bushes and mud. Water was the mistress of that night, or perhaps it was the sky, from which the rain came. He went outside and began to be lashed by the storm. He walked slowly, but increasingly forgetting the pain. The bandages became soaked and fell away. He was naked again. He was no longer a civilized man, but a kind of savage with long hair and a thick beard, walking hunched over, his skin covered in grime that water couldn't wash away because they were scars. Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his left eye and saw a flash he mistook for lightning. Then the flash disappeared, but he realized he couldn't see with his right eye. He stopped, clutching his head and covering his left eye. He felt his face to recognize it. His right eye was open, but blind. He opened his left eye, which, although it still hurt, saw things with a clarity that seemed borrowed. For it wasn't the view of the countryside on a torrential night. He thought he saw the moon, absurdly, high in the sky. Perhaps it was the enormous eye of an owl, but an owl was as absurd as the moon in the midst of that storm. Or perhaps it was the reflection of lightning on the river, which in turn was reflected in the gases accumulated by the clouds. Another absurdity he needed to invent, because he didn't feel ready to accept the simplicity of his vision. And that simplicity was nothing more than the straightforwardness of the obvious, of that which lacks the complications of logic or the intricacies of reasoning. The space in his mind that had grown so much over the years, that space of necessary congruities, would gradually disappear, shrinking until it no longer required that kind of filter for reality.

Because reality was in his unthinking left eye.

He walked along a dead-end path, every few meters a tree trunk or the wind itself blocked his way. He would stop then, trembling, clutching his body with his arms crossed, seeing that the scars weren't reopening, and that the pain was concentrating solely in the back of his eye. Then he

would continue; the path would clear or be interrupted by the storm's constant shifts. Lightning would illuminate what had been there only a second before and the next it would have vanished. It was the play of shadows, surely, but also of sound: thunder and breaking leaves, and cries that were shrieks. He knew they were frightened birds or other animals in their burrows beneath the mountain of leaves and branches. He also knew that men cried out like that, many kilometers away, in some town or city, and he, as absurdly as he had seen the moon in the midst of the storm, heard them, distinguishing the different tones that represented so many different shades of pain.

Manuel now knew that pain isn't as it's often portrayed: the consequence of a sharp tear, an unexpected blow, a broken bone, or a severed muscle. Pain is as subtle as silence, and as profound. But human senses are weak and insensitive; we need to amplify sounds and increase flashes of light to see, hear, or feel pain. We then believe that sorrow afflicts and pain tears, but it's the other way around: pain afflicts continuously and silently, while sorrow is merely the abrupt crack of what has been broken.

That's why he walked along a dirt path surrounded by branches that swayed in the wind and bent and broke under the weight of the water and the pounding rain. He saw the night with only one eye covered by the lash of the water, yet he could see clearly ahead and behind him. It didn't surprise him, then, to hear the horse's snorts and the noise of the cart; he had already heard them coming from several kilometers away.

When the cart was beside him on the road, he moved aside slightly to let it pass, but the driver spoke to him:

-Hey, friend, what's going on with you?

Manuel ignored him.

-Listen, old man, walking around naked like that in this rain is going to get you killed.

But when Manuel continued to ignore him, he stopped the cart and got out. He walked the few meters that separated them and grabbed him by the arm.

-Get in the cart or you'll force me to make you.

Manuel stared at him with feverish eyes, but with his left eye he could only see half the world. He saw that tall, thin man who was protected from the torrential rain by nothing more than the clothes he wore. He thought he

saw that the man had very short hair and a sparse beard on his angular face with its aquiline nose.
"What's wrong with him? Is he crazy or sick? Never mind, come with me." Without letting go of his arm, he dragged him to the cart.
"Get in," he said. "I guess I'll have to do it myself." He put his arm around Manuel's waist and lifted him up. Once he was seated, he pushed him back down. Then he climbed back onto the driver's seat and continued driving.
Manuel lay there. He could see the sky through the treetops, which occasionally tried to cross their branches over the road, sometimes shielding him from the rain, but most of the time he felt it pounding against his face. He sensed he wasn't alone in the back of the cart, and looking to the side, he saw the bodies of two adults and a boy. They were cold, their pallor made more apparent by the flashes of lightning.
He looked up in the futile effort to find the moon, and met the face of the other man who had turned his head and was looking at him.
- What's his name, old man?
-Manuel.
"Well Manuel, I'm Estanislao Gonçalvez. Are you going to tell me what you're doing naked in the middle of a storm? And who gave you those injuries? Were you mugged, my friend?"
"Who are these people?" Manuel asked, as if he hadn't heard.
"Well, you'll answer me later. They're cholera victims. I've been going from house to house for a while now, and I've visited almost the entire province in the last month. But when I arrive, they're already dead or dying, and all I can do is pick them up and take them to be buried. But don't worry, my friend, they won't infect you. The rainwater has washed them more than enough. They're cleaner than you are with those wounds. Tell me, if you deign to answer, why were you castrated? They look like a surgeon's incisions."
- And what do you know...!
- Didn't I tell you I'm a doctor?
-He looks more like a gravedigger.
The man laughed, but the sound formed a hollow noise in the air beneath the raindrops, like something falling into a wooden box. Yes, Manuel said to himself, the cart was a kind of wide coffin.

"Ask my fellow members about that. My parents are from the north, you know, from Brazil. My family works in funeral services, but I became a doctor and came to the provinces. And who's going to convince me now that I'm not doing the same thing they are?"
The journey was long, and Manuel fell asleep. When he woke up, he was being shaken by the doctor, who was telling him to wake up.
- Hey, old man, get up and help me!
He had given her a bundle of cloth, like a sack, to cover herself with, waterproof and warm. When she sat down with her feet dangling from the driver's seat, Gonçalvez had a shovel in one hand and offered her the other.
"Here, if there are two of us we'll do it faster. It's almost dawn and I have to get home because my wife must be furious."
Together they searched along the side of the road.
-You dig the well for the boy, it doesn't need to be very long, I'll take care of the others.
Gonçalvez started first. Manuel began digging listlessly and slowly, glancing at the doctor who was striving to dig with the same dedication he would use to open a diseased abdomen or set a broken bone. He didn't seem like a doctor, but rather a manipulator of the human body. He saw him throw down his shovel once the grave was finished and walk toward the cart. He dragged the parents' two corpses to the ground, tied their legs together with a rope, and tied the same rope around his waist. He dragged them both at the same time, left them beside the hole, and without untying them, pushed it in with a kick. He made the sign of the cross. Then he returned to the cart and grabbed the body of the child, who must have been four or five years old. He placed it behind his neck, holding its feet and arms with his other hand, like some kind of animal.
"Are you done, pal?" he shouted, because the sound of the rain was too thick. Without waiting for an answer, he went to his side and threw the body into the grave. He shook his head disapprovingly, but said nothing. He started shoveling, returning the earth first to one grave and then to the other. When he finished, he leaned with his arms crossed over the shovel, and seemed to be pouring all the weariness of his body onto it.
- Why didn't you put the boy with his parents?
"So you wanted to save yourself the work too?" Gonçalvez replied. Perhaps he was looking at him ironically, but it was impossible to see him now after

the downpour. He only felt the hollow sound that took the shape of a fabric unraveling and fraying in the rain, rotting away.
Suddenly, every word that man uttered sounded meaningless, like a bit of earth falling into an empty box, only to disappear silently once it was full. When Gonçalvez finished any sentence, there was nothing that could even be described as silence.
An absurd emptiness because it wasn't an emptiness at all, but rather the absence of everything, including emptiness and silence.
She heard him breathe deeply in the darkness of the road, as if he had suddenly regained his physical strength.
"Not together with children and adults, because the earth feeds differently. On one side it decays very quickly, on the other grass soon grows. There's something that changes in puberty more than the body. Knowledge changes everything. The main difference we notice is in our gaze, but it's merely the most obvious and foolish sign of all those that will follow. By the time we know, we've already been infected by the cholera bug, so to speak."
She started laughing out loud at his pun.
-Don't pay too much attention to me, you asked me and I got carried away by what I'm always thinking about while I walk these roads with the dead behind me.
They resumed their journey, and Manuel fell asleep again, this time alone in the cart.

When he awoke, the sun was peeking through the clouds, its glare falling unbearably on his face. He threw off the cloth because he was completely drenched in sweat. As he sat up, he saw that they had stopped in front of a country house on the outskirts of a town, isolated on a wide, flat piece of land enclosed by a natural boundary of stunted bushes.
He saw Gonçalvez leave.
"Come on, Manuel, you're burning with fever. We'll take care of you." And as he let himself be led away, he felt a woman's arm helping him to stay upright.
When they entered, they crossed the room, which he barely saw, and led him to a bedroom with a wide bed and sheets so clean they looked as if they had just been laid out. He sank down onto the mattress. Another one,

he told himself. He had spent the last few weeks of his life lying down because he had no other choice, but he promised himself that somehow he would do everything possible not to die on one. Perhaps he was muttering this thought, because the other two were laughing as they moved around the room, arranging objects that sounded like porcelain, and at other times he heard the sound of water and smelled soap on himself. A man's hands were cleaning his wounds, and a woman's hands were washing his hair. He opened his eyes for a moment and heard her voice telling him to close them so that soap wouldn't get in his eyes. Manuel obeyed, as he had obeyed Altea many times. For a moment his gaze left the room through the open door, traveled down the straight hallway, passed through another nearby door, and saw a crib in the other room. It was right at the edge of his line of sight. He thought he heard a cry, too, but the laughter of the woman cleaning him was as youthful and fresh as soap bubbles bursting, releasing something with no prior history. Each soap bubble, as it died, filled the air with a weight that condensed inside the house, creating something that wasn't yet there but felt as stony and ungovernable as the future.

Yes, that's it, he told himself as they dried him off and covered him with clean sheets. The feeling of the future was so constant because it was condensing nearby, growing stronger as he left his room and walked down the hall, until it became an obvious and heavy certainty, like a rock suspended in the air that sooner or later would take the shape of the room, or perhaps before that would fall on someone, crushing them.

For the next few days they cared for him and fed him. Gonçalvez returned late every night, smelling of medicine and herbs, but mostly with his boots caked in mud. He had traveled many kilometers north, and said there were flooded areas that would take months to dry out.

"And there's no more land to bury their dead?" Manuel asked.

The doctor sat to his left and looked at his wife, who was to the right of the bed. She had taken to reading to him in the evenings before dinner. They glanced at each other, then smiled.

"My husband has picked up those habits, and he won't break them. We can't hide anything from you; it's as if you see with a third eye."

"Let me check your eyesight once and for all, my friend. You've resisted for too long, now that you're feeling better from your injuries," said Gonçalvez.

Manuel let him approach with a flashlight.

- Are you saying you can't see anything on the right or the left?
-From the law.
Gonálvez had the palm of his hand on Manuel's forehead and held first one eyelid and then the other with his thumb.
"But the right one is fine. It's the left one that's cloudy, I mean obstructed by what are called cataracts. Let's do a test."
He covered only her right eye with a bandage.
- Do you see anything?
-All.
- And what do you see?
-To you, my friend, to Mrs. Cintia, and to the child Aurelio.
Gonçalvez turned around to look back, and exchanged a glance with his wife.
- And where is the boy?
-In his room, up ahead.
- And how can you see it if there are walls in between?
-How should I know... I'm just saying what I see.
Gonçalvez frowned, removed the blindfold, and covered her left eye. He signaled to his wife to leave the room quietly.
- And do you see the same thing now?
-I can't know, I can't see anything.
-Don't lie to me.
"I'm not lying. Ask your wife," he said, turning his head to the right. "Didn't I explain the same thing to you a little while ago, ma'am?"
Goncálvez then removed the blindfold. Manuel rubbed his eyes and saw that she was no longer there, realizing the trap, but the other man was already convinced.
The day he got up for the first time to have dinner with the family, he dressed in Gonçalvez trousers and a shirt, too big for him, but his wife had mended them. He was greeted with a set table and a round of flattering applause. The dining room was brightly lit, and the table looked elegant with its white tablecloth, candlesticks, and fine china. There was a high chair for the boy. Aurelio was two years old. Cintia had carried him in her arms to her room a few days earlier so she could meet him, and that's when she noticed something was wrong. The child had ash-blond hair and such translucent skin that when he became agitated or cried, his face flushed

the color of a tomato, and when he slept, he was so pale that the veins in his cheeks and neck were visible. Manuel had stroked him, sensing something building up. He could only compare it to a flood, as that was the most vivid image he had in mind during those days. Every night, the father spoke of the flooded villages and the floating dead, so many that it was impossible to collect them and bury them somewhere dry. Manuel watched the boy silently as he stroked his hair, while the mother smiled. But he, too, saw the child's room, beyond the walls, empty yet with a sense of density, as if something—again, that indefinable, undefined thing—were condensing in the air. Something that would petrify around the boy. It took him many days to even begin to grasp what it was. The uncertainty personified by the properties of the air: the humidity, the density.

Then he saw, on the night of the dinner, Aurelio's left eye, which was watching him, serious, lost in thought, from the high chair on the other side of the table.

The voices of his parents distracted him, talking about the village and the flood, trying to steer clear of the daily recollection of illnesses. Gonçalvez tried hard to keep his conversation light and trivial, but he kept falling back on the same topics. The woman was the only one who managed to keep things interesting, distracting herself by serving food or going back and forth between the kitchen and the dishes. She had prepared lentil stew, boiled potatoes, and cornmeal porridge. But she couldn't be the constant focus of the conversation, so she busied herself feeding Aurelio. She had mashed a potato with her fork and was now feeding it to him by the spoonful. The boy opened his mouth without protest, but his gaze drifted toward Manuel. When Manuel noticed, he too began to glance at him out of the corner of his eye, without taking his eyes off Gonçalvez, who was telling him about his family and his arrival from Brazil. Manuel had already noticed that the country house and its surroundings displayed an economic prosperity that didn't match the meager income from his profession. His wife said, with a touch of irony, that her husband was too good to charge patients. Manuel wasn't sure she meant what he interpreted it to mean: failure. She must have felt sorry for this doctor who couldn't do more than he did, and who had perhaps found more pleasure and compensation in the work of an occasional undertaker. But all that was merely the surface of what everyone seemed to know but didn't say. He, however, had seen it,

and perhaps it was thanks to his discerning eye. Gonçalvez's failure was perhaps nothing more than his acceptance that he couldn't be anything else because it was in his lineage, to call by that name a certain kind of predestination that didn't refer only to the future, but was rooted in a past so imprecise it seemed to have no beginning. Acceptance was etched on Estanislao Gonçalvez's face with ever-increasing certainty, but it was nothing more than a resignation that carried pain like its right hand, its guide, the solace that allowed it to rejoice in the sense of tragedy. Without that sense, nothing that happened to him would ever have coherence or purpose. Calling the internal logic of his tragedy meaning was what reconciled him with his present: the death that surrounded him without touching him.

And in the living room of that house with whitewashed walls, fine curtains, furniture brought from Buenos Aires, European china, and crystal glasses—all of which could only be explained by the money the Gonçalvez family sent their wayward son, money that came from their old funeral home business—Manuel observed the look in Aurelio's left eye. For the first time, the boy raised a hand and refused the spoon his mother offered him. She insisted, but gave up, and stood up, taking the plate to the kitchen.

Manuel and Aurelio looked at each other, and it was then that their left eyes met obliquely, and in that intersection, Manuel saw what had troubled him so much all those days. What he had sensed in the boy's father's life as a predestination slowly moving in the same direction, as if that something bore pity for the adult man's soul, in Aurelio's case, it was a condemnation. There would be no pity, no possibility of compassion, because he was a child, or perhaps precisely because of that, there wouldn't be. A child will feel less pain because he doesn't yet know what it's about. Adults compare their experiences, and instead of offering comfort, they fuel their resentment and sink their sense of tragedy deeper. The first time pain is an event beyond compare; why should there be lamenting without knowing what it's about? Then will come the fear, with the memory. That's why the future is so cruel to children like Aurelio. It punishes them without them realizing it, and when they do, it is already too late, and then comes the pain itself: tearing, anguish, despair.

He saw it surrounded by dark walls, like those of the Santa Lucía hospital. Yes, it was a convent.

He saw him dressed in black, hunched over, digging.
He saw her crying, protesting, and complaining about what she couldn't prevent. He didn't understand the words, but she was arguing with someone, pointing at the ceiling every now and then.
In one hand he held the shovel, with which he removed the earth and set it aside, constantly stopping to hold onto the cross that hung around his neck. A back and forth from the shovel to the cross, from the cross to the shovel.
Then Aurelio, the two-year-old boy, in the brightly lit dining room, raised an arm, pointing at the chandelier on the ceiling with its many lit candles. The father looked too, searching for what had caught his son's attention. The mother returned from the kitchen with a plate in her hands and stopped to look as well. But Manuel's gaze was fixed on Aurelio's left eye, and then he saw the fragility of the bone that had broken perhaps countless years ago in the long line of atoms of family or race—who could know, nor be certain of the preeminence or privilege of tragedy? The fragility was no longer such, because the fissure was now as firm as rock, and through that crack they could both see each other, and both could see what the other was contemplating, ecstatic with fear and surrounded by a feeling of wretched anguish.
The boy watched Christ on the ceiling of the room, like a spider that wanted to descend upon them, but only gave them its great shadow, cold and black as emptiness.
Manuel had never seen a hollow stone before; Aurelio's heart was enough.

From that night on, he made a point of spending time with Aurelio. He would carry him outside in his arms, then leave him on the grass and sit and watch him play. He always saw the same thing in Aurelio's left eye, a shadow that the boy recognized when he watched him; then he would stop playing and they would gaze at each other.
The mother remarked during dinner that she found it wonderful to see them together in the park, gazing at each other as if they were speaking in silence. That night, Manuel began to consider what he should do. Aurelio's pain could be prevented, and perhaps Ariel's death had served to make him go through everything he had gone through until he found this other boy, whose name sounded remarkably similar to the other's, and whose physical appearance differed only in age.

If he could spare Aurelio his future suffering, and the agonizing death he had already witnessed (shovels had become the family's primary tool), he too would be redeemed. That was why he had escaped from the hospital, not to save himself from his own physical death, but to offer it up as a sacrifice. In this way, he would save his soul and Aurelio's.

And he began to think about how to do it. Every night for the next week he lay awake planning a thousand ways, until he fell asleep and woke up late. And when he heard the knocks on the door and Aurelio calling for him to have breakfast and play, he would wake up lamenting that another day had passed in which everything had only happened in dreams, and the morning would pester him with the sweet reality of what was destined to become bitter.

She would get up and go through her day as if it were a lost day. Her life was now nothing more than a thorny burden she loathed. She saw only in Aurelio's eyes a peace that consisted precisely in abolishing that very peace. In cutting the pain off at its root, or rather, before it was even born. But wasn't that pain already present in Aurelio's life? What are the past and the future but a euphemism to disguise the architecture of the present?

He could already see in Aurelio's eyes that no matter how much he laughed, he was already suffering. The only difference between a child's pain and an adult's is despair. The former's is irrational and uncontrollable, disguising the pain with purely physical expressions. The latter's is almost carefully chosen; one reasons with it until it becomes a habit, and covers it with layers of anguish that, like layers of earth, bury the despair until it takes root in the soul and becomes a garden of thorns and weeds.

On Sunday, Cintia went to midday mass with her son. Gonçalvez went out to make visits. She had asked Manuel if he wanted to accompany them, because he had seen the cross, but he refused. He stayed home, wandering through it alone, thinking about the family's daily routines every minute of the day. He was like a thief investigating how to break into a place he had already entered. But he wasn't there to steal anything, but to free a condemned soul.

When they returned from church, he heard the front door open and close, the boy's voice, and Cintia's laughter. He heard her footsteps toward the kitchen and Aurelio's short, clumsy steps toward Manuel's room. He saw

him standing in the doorway, because he'd been told that even if the doors were open, he should ask before entering. Manuel looked at him without saying a word: this was his last chance. A refusal would have made him turn away, and perhaps Manuel wouldn't have dared to do anything. But silence was easier; between them, it implied permission.
Aurelio ran to the bed and climbed in. They hugged. The boy told him what he had seen in the church, the people they had encountered, what he had heard. Manuel let him talk and went to close the door.
From time to time, Cintia would pass by the hallway, apron on and dish towel in hand, glancing at the closed door, always smiling. She was the complete opposite of her husband: he was melancholy, she was joy. They complemented each other, and the boy was a mixture of both, never quite forming a symbiosis. One of them would prevail: the father was the body made melancholy, the mother the soul made optimism.
Christ, however, was precisely a Christ because he had become incarnate. A god cannot die nailed to a cross, because he has neither hands nor feet. The flesh always wins all the battles, but loses the great war.
Manuel forced Aurelio to be quiet and lie down. And before the boy could answer, he put a pillow over his face and pressed down hard. Aurelio kicked and thrashed, but it was easy for Manuel to hold him down. He was so small, after all, his body so tiny and his arms so thin.
The mother knocked on the door, calling him for lunch.
"Let's go!" said Manuel.
Perhaps she was surprised not to hear Aurelio's voice; it was very unusual for him to remain silent after returning from the street. She had heard him talking and talking without interruption from the kitchen, and suddenly he had fallen silent.
She opened the door and saw them. She ran to Manuel and began pulling at his clothes. His shirt tore, and she tried to pull at his belt, but she wasn't strong enough. Manuel had recovered thanks to her care; she had given him back the strength he was now using to kill his son.
"Stop it!" she shouted, crying and hitting Manuel's back in vain.
He hadn't turned to look at her. In fact, he had closed his eyes as if it were a way of not only not seeing her or even hearing her, but he seemed to be concentrating his strength on pressing the pillow against the boy's face.

But suddenly he no longer felt his mother's blows. He didn't know how much time passed, but it must have been very brief. He did hear her footsteps pacing back and forth in the house, then the rustle of her dress, so close he imagined he would feel the useless blows on his back again. The boy was still moving; he couldn't let go of him.
And the shot rang out. The noise was faster than the pain.
Manuel fell face down on Aurelio's body, but he was no longer pressing down on the pillow.
The mother climbed onto the bed and freed her son.
Aurelio's eyes were open, and he was breathing. Without crying, he stared at Manuel's wound on his back. A large red hole that quickly turned black. When his mother lifted him from the bed, he twitched in her arms, silent, trying to touch Manuel's body, reaching for that back that was like the front door, the abruptly opened gateway to a world only the two of them had glimpsed. Manuel was going to know it; he was already on his way to explore it completely. Aurelio missed that: what was to come.

Gonçalvez arrived earlier that night, since it was Sunday. When he entered, he saw his wife sitting in the rocking chair, holding Aurelio in her arms. The boy was asleep, but when he approached, he opened his eyes.
"What happened?" the father asked the mother.
Her hair was disheveled, and one sleeve of her dress was stained with blood. He figured it must be Manuel; perhaps his wounds had reopened. He went to the room. The door was open. On the floor in front of the bed lay the shotgun he sometimes used for hunting. Manuel's body was still face down on the bed.
He ran his hands through his hair, confused. He was going to go back to the room to ask what had happened, but he told himself that if she had done that, it was because she hadn't been able to help herself. From his experience as a doctor, he had learned many things about people's behavior, and from his increasingly frequent job as an undertaker, he had learned that one learns even more from corpses than from the living.
He turned the body over, undressed it, and wrapped it in the sheets. Before doing so, he removed the cross and placed it on the nightstand. He closed the door, went out into the yard, and walked toward the back shed. He

spent the rest of that Sunday afternoon, and well past nightfall, building the coffin. He went back inside, but Cintia was alone in front of the door.
- Do you want me to help you?
He shook his head, went inside, and dragged the body back out. She would wash the floor later. She dragged him down the hallway, up the front steps, across the grass, and then over the dirt to the coffin. She put him inside and nailed it shut. Before leaving, she went over to the cart.
"Don't forget this, it doesn't belong to us," he said, and handed over the silver cross wrapped in a bandage.
That same night he made the entire journey to the port near Santa Lucía. Manuel had told him part of his story, and Gonçalvez pieced it together. By the time he arrived, it was almost morning. He found the dock manager and explained the situation. Together, they carried the coffin to the shed. Inside, there was another crate. He handed him an envelope containing the cross.
Then he got out and climbed back into the cart. The horse was the same as always, and perhaps he remembered the scent of that man they had found in the storm many nights before. But he would soon forget, as Gonçalvez would too, because there were too many dead to remember them all, and he knew that memory is even more fragile than the flesh.

8

Altea came out of the shed where the crates were and stood next to Máximo, who was looking toward the boat in the middle of the river. The dog was also sitting, staring at the same fixed point as his master. When she approached, Max wagged his tail, but he looked tired.
"They say it's flooded to the north, so that will be a better course for the 'Juan Manuel'," said Máximo, chipping a piece of wood with his tense hands.

She took his hands and asked:
Are you sure it's Manuel in there? And how...
-Because I've known Beltrame for many years, and he saw Ariel born, and...
-That's fine, but Manuel's drawer arrived closed...
-Let's ask him...
But the old man had already approached them, and had evidently heard.
"With all due respect, madam, Dr. Gonçalvez brought it himself, the captain knows him..." Máximo nodded, "...and, besides, he left this for whoever came to collect the body..."
He took something wrapped in a cloth bandage from his pocket and handed it to Altea. When she unwrapped it and saw the cross, she burst into tears that forced her to her knees. They both helped her and sat her down on one of the dock's pilings. The river waves crashed against the wood as she wept uncontrollably. Máximo knelt beside her, embraced her, and gestured to the old man. As he walked away, he heard her repeat, "It's my fault, it's my fault," and he left thinking about the way she clutched the cross to her stomach.
"Calm down," said Máximo. "It's going to be bad for the child."
Slowly, she calmed down, dried her eyes, and looked at him mockingly.
Didn't we waste all this time trying to get rid of him? If we hadn't left the ship, Manuel would still be alive.
-But we don't know anything for sure yet....
- Why did he leave the ship? Why didn't Julio attend to him?
They looked toward the river. Natacha's figure was no longer by the railing. There was no movement on deck. It looked like a dead ship.
They walked back to the guardhouse together. At the door, they found Beltrame talking to an officer who gave them a military salute.
- Are you Captain Mendoza, sir?
-That's right, officer.
-I am Major Álvaro González, I bring you a letter...
Maximo grabbed the paper folded in four.
-As you can see, these are just some poorly written letters from a prisoner, and I've only come this far out of deference to the recipient...
The major was dressed in uniform, holding his cap in his hands and wearing a slight, complacent smile.

Máximo unfolded the crumpled paper. It was Julio Ruiz's calligraphic, doctor's handwriting.
"Where is the body?" he asked.
Altea looked at them without understanding, took the paper and read.
"I can't tell you precisely, Captain, that was handled by the corporal who served as my assistant in the...in the..." he said, looking at Altea, as if hesitating to pronounce such words in front of a pregnant lady.
"The execution," Mendoza said, and the major nodded.
There was no farewell. González mounted his horse and rode off again the way he had come.
Maximo's hands were trembling. He had snatched the paper from Altea again and was holding it so tightly he was going to tear it. He walked toward the end of the pier and she followed him, crying. Beltrame tried to comfort her.
When they were by the edge, Maximus said:
-Three dead, three dead on my back, three dead in my heart, Altea.
He sat down, swinging his legs in midair. She did the same. Then he leaned over Altea's skirt and hid his face in her dress.
Beltrame didn't know whether to leave or stay; it wasn't honorable for a man of Captain Mendoza's stature to know that another man saw him crying. But then he heard him say:
-Get the boat ready, old man...
"But Máximo," said Altea. "Don't go now, first we have to bury the dead."

Two hours later they were on their way to the cemetery. Beltrame, Máximo, and two men from the port, who had offered to accompany them even though night would soon fall, carried the coffins. Altea and Máximo walked in front, the old man and the others sitting in the back beside the coffins. The dog went with them, occasionally sniffing at the seams of the wood. The smell of the corpses was more bearable in the open air, especially since a wind had risen, heralding the imminent arrival of autumn, and the scent of damp earth and the river seemed to swirl gently around them. They stopped in front of the chapel, and a boy appeared, running.
-Captain, the priest says he's leaving now.

They saw him come out right away, walking on the damp dust in his braided sandals and old, worn cassock. But Father Leguizamón wasn't old yet; he was no more than forty and had only recently arrived in that area. He had inherited the room from the previous priest, who had been killed by the Indians, and he had also inherited the cassock, which he washed and mended where it was torn.

He climbed in at the back, pushing one of the crates, and the others made room for him. The boy waited below, watching Altea with curiosity.

"Are you coming?" she asked him.

The boy went upstairs with the others. When the priest saw his smile, he slapped it away.

The cemetery was two or three leagues downriver, beyond a nameless little village. It was already dark, but Máximo insisted on burying the coffins and putting an end to it all once and for all. Only fools would be afraid of the dark in a cemetery, which it wasn't even really, since there were no more than fifty graves with some kind of marking, be it a cross, a headstone, or just a stone. The priest said they'd been burying people there for over a hundred years, according to what he'd been told at the vicarage when he first arrived in the province. There were no records.

The coffins were lowered, two men for each one, while Altea and the priest illuminated the path with lamps. The sky had been overcast since morning, so there wasn't even a moon, and perhaps that was for the best. Moonlight over a cemetery was more stimulating to the imagination than complete darkness.

The boy had clung to one of Altea's hands, and the dog was walking beside him.

Maximo walked ahead, carrying the head of Ariel's coffin. He had heard voices all the way there. Voices of three dead men who made no attempt to speak clearly enough for him to understand. But how could he expect that of them? he wondered. Each one dies alone, and their despair stems from that loneliness, like an unfillable void, a stony emptiness knotted in the throat, or perhaps a kind of hardened clot formed in the brains of those who remain. A dead clot that continues to beat to the rhythm of a nonexistent heart, opening and closing, opening and closing, emitting voices with the monotonous rhythm of a drone.

There was no end to it, he knew. But he was going to try to drown out those sounds with others that were louder, brutal perhaps, and even with the disrespectful banality of the superfluous. He would bury the dead, shout obscenities, break things, and maybe even kill people. He would commit violent acts that involved a lot of noise and a lot of scandal. Perhaps that way the voices, even if they didn't stop, would suffer the diminishment of contempt.

Even your voice, Ariel, your soft, shy, timid boy's voice, your voice so respectful it implied unnecessary humiliation. You were my son more than if you had been my son; you were the clear point of my conscience, like that lamp that now guides us in this darkness filled with noises and whispers. The noises of the world beneath the earth, the whispers of the sky. They are moving the deposits in the bone factory, making room to receive you. They will make a clear space for you because you saw them before, in your self-absorbed contemplations transcribed in your drawings.

And Julio, you will find those you saved and those you killed with the knowledge of your hands, instruments of your wise mind, filled with books and corpses. A doctor's mind is a vast cemetery where each body has been meticulously dissected, muscle by muscle, vein by vein, bone by bone. They will prepare an honorable space for you, with the architecture of a Gothic cathedral, where the song of souls will resound in the naves, coursing through the pipes of an organ made of bones: the femurs you severed, the humeri you broke, and the skulls you opened. And your tomb will be a mausoleum made of frozen blood. Because in the cathedral they built for you, it will always be winter.

She muttered these words, head bowed, believing she was hiding them from the others' ears. But Altea heard some of them, and she repeated them, substituting another name for the original.

The priest was praying too, perhaps, but possibly he was only cursing having accepted that commitment, or perhaps he was looking for a large enough place to dig three graves. He stumbled over stones that were not just stones, but markers indicating a burial site. He made the sign of the cross and continued on his way, holding his lamp aloft.

Finally, he said:

"This is a good spot." Altea asked him to pass her the other lamp and lifted both.

It was a space among the weeds, recently opened because the smell of the burning could still be felt.
They left the crates on the ground and the boy ran to get the shovels from the cart. Altea was afraid he would get lost in the darkness.
"He knows this place better than we do, at least during the day, and he's probably come here at night too with the other boys," said the priest.
He returned soon after and handed over the shovels. The men took turns digging, and it was almost midnight when they finished. They lowered the coffins and returned the earth to the graves. Father Leguizamón said a prayer for the dead. Mendoza asked him to say a few words for the repose of Julio Ruiz's soul.
- “Grant them, O Lord, eternal rest, when he comes to judge the world by fire.”
Each one made the sign of the cross at the wrong time and poorly: Altea's was slow and tearful, the boy's was incomplete, the priest's was repeated several times, the men of the town were interrupted and doubtful, and old Beltrame's was tense and firm.
Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza was the only one who took so long that everyone thought he wouldn't do it. He made the sign, but it was very strange. The others didn't understand it, except for Altea, who looked at him bitterly. Máximo had made the sign of the cross three times, but not like Catholics do—on the forehead, mouth, and chest—but like the Orthodox cross. She knew that Máximo's thoughts were fixed on Natacha. That woman, who hadn't been able to hold him with love, had now trapped him again with the knots of anger.
They returned to the port around two in the morning. Beltrame offered them the cabin to sleep in; he couldn't give them anything else. But Father Leguizamón flatly refused and told them to sleep in the church. So they returned to the chapel, pulled out the seats, and lay down on two blankets. The altar candles were always burning, illuminating several meters around. The shadow of the Christ on the altar was larger than the original figure leaning against a column. No one spoke for a long time, and then Altea's voice was heard:
Did you know that Manuel wanted to be a priest? It was a tradition in his family that at least one member of each generation would enter the Church…

-I know about that, they give them out as payment for many benefits…
"But when we met, it went against his parents' wishes..." Altea stopped and choked back her tears. "We should never have married. I didn't love him enough... God, I feel so guilty. Who knows what must have happened, and I treated him with such contempt..."
They were in a church, and they weren't husband and wife; the priest knew it, yet he had left them alone together. Christ watched and said nothing as they embraced.
“There are many things we shouldn’t have done, and should have prevented others from doing,” Mendoza said. “All we can do is regret it until the next time we do or fail to do the exact same thing. They say Christ dies every time we sin, and rises again every time we repent.”
The flames of the candles moved with the breeze that came in from the bell tower, and caused the shadows to move.
They finally fell asleep, and the boy found them cuddled up when he came to wake them in the morning. Max had slept with him and was now pacing around. He looked happy and well-fed after many days.
-The boat is ready as you requested last night, captain.
Máximo rubbed his eyes in the light. Altea got up and followed the boy to the house, where his mother was waiting to bathe. Mendoza washed in the priest's room, who had left early. Then they both met at the port. The "Juan Manuel" looked gray in the dim light of that autumn morning. There was no significant activity, only the footsteps of some sailors he couldn't quite make out on deck.
The rower was ready, and they both climbed in and sat down. The boy said goodbye to Max, and the dog jumped into the boat.
"You're a very brave boy, Bernardo. Say hi to your mother for me," Altea said. "I'm sorry we never met your father."
"I don't have one, ma'am, but my mom said I was a doctor." Pride flushed her cheeks as she saw that they weren't mocking her like many others should have done before.
-I would like you to write to me, missy, the Father will read your letters to me…
"Okay, I'll write to you," she said. "What's your full name?"
-Bernardo Ruiz, misia.

They were already walking away when Maximus heard that name over the river's waters, and he remembered the letter he carried in the inside pocket of his jacket. It had ceased to be the sad wish of a prisoner and had become a law.

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The morning they returned to the ship was a hazy gray, and the sun's reflection through the clouds echoed across the river, creating bursts of light that were almost pale shadows against the iridescent backdrop of the sky. However, once on deck, Máximo Mendoza discovered that his ship, in which he had invested so much in hopes and money, was nothing more than a ghost ship, overtaken by silence, filth, and the smell of decay.
He helped Altea up, and noticed in her eyes the same thing he was feeling. The deck was filthy with rotten fish, papers fluttering in the wind, and the smell of dampness and decay wafted from everywhere—surely from the galley, the cabins, the men's quarters. The old, disused masts looked like dead logs in a burnt forest, for that's what the deck looked like, almost black with grime and neglect.
Mendoza shouted to his men, initially standing motionless, expecting the usual immediate response to his command. However, no one appeared. Only when he began to walk across the deck to the main hatch did one of the sailors emerge. At first, he seemed not to recognize him; he was one of the oldest and looked tired and haggard. He rubbed his eyes as he finished climbing the ladder, and standing before the captain, he made the most absurd face Mendoza had ever seen: the face of a drunkard whose only concern was to get even more drunk.
- Márquez! What's happening to everyone, where are the others?
- Captain! My dear friend, it's been so long since we've seen you, we thought you had left us forever…

The old man hugged him, clinging to him and refusing to let go until he forced him to. He would have liked to beat him until he woke up completely and explained why he had let the ship, that vessel that Emerindo Márquez himself had helped repair as an engineer, fall into such a state. The timbers creaked, and the engines were dead.
Altea had approached and the dog had moved away, no doubt sniffing at old smells.
She placed a hand on the old man's head.
-Márquez, my dear, don't you recognize me? Come here, sit on this bench and calm down.
Maximus stood watching her do what he should have done, but his anger was so intense that the only sensible thing to do was to refrain from acting and remain in hostile silence. He was thinking, mainly, of someone who was undoubtedly in a room full of reliquaries and crucifixes below deck.
Márquez had begun to weep, covering his face with his hands while Altea, sitting beside him, soothed him with comforting words, gently stroking his calloused hands to try and separate them. She asked Máximo to fetch water and food; the old man looked malnourished, as if he had consumed nothing but brandy for weeks. Mendoza had suddenly acquired the expression of someone who had regained awareness of a pride he had squandered through his own negligence. He was the captain, not an ensign.
She didn't move. Altea didn't even repeat her request. The old engineer needed her. He had been one of the few officers who had treated her with selfless kindness since the day she and Manuel boarded. Julio Ruiz had always been respectful but distant, while Márquez had treated her like a daughter or a sister, without excessive familiarity, but also without class guilt.
"Since little Ariel died, the ship died with him," the old man said, his tears drying as his words strung together in clear and increasingly lucid sentences. He was regaining his sanity with the help of his recovered thoughts. He was leaving behind the days of timelessness, filled with shouts from the cabins and hurried footsteps in the corridors.
Dr. Ruiz locked himself away to care for Mr. Manuel for many days. Mrs. Natacha prayed and lamented all day and every night. There was no one to control the men. They slept and got drunk. I tried to keep things under

control, but no one listened to me anymore. Then the doctor disappeared; no one saw him leave, but Mr. Manuel was gone too, and Mrs. Natacha got angry. One day she gathered the remaining men—many had gone ashore—and insulted them and threw them out. They demanded their pay, and she went to her cabin and came back with a chest. She divided the money, and the men left. I stayed because I have nowhere else to go, because I don't want to abandon this ship. If the "Juan Manuel" dies, I'll die too.

Mendoza knew that Márquez had poured all his experience and effort into repairing the ship. In Buenos Aires, his colleagues had congratulated him as they witnessed the progress at the shipyard. Márquez was a respected man, and he had an engineer son and an architect son, both living in France. He almost never spoke of his third son; he was a painter, he had once said, and he was ashamed to mention him. He had begun to cry again, but suddenly opened his eyes, startled, staring at the hatch through which Máximo had rushed in, nearly tripping on the steps, shouting, pleading, for Natacha's name.

Altea got up and followed him, but she could no longer run as fast as before and was afraid of falling down the stairs. It would be a way to get rid of the boy, she thought, but she could also kill herself, and now the imperative was to stop Máximo, to protect him from himself. Because she knew that if she didn't go after him, there would be something worse to regret. When she reached Natacha's cabin, he had barely crossed the threshold and was already looking around the room. She saw him scan the walls and the furniture covered with relics and images of saints and crucifixes of all shapes and sizes. She couldn't help but do the same, and she was particularly struck by those twisted Christs made by the Indians. The cross she now wore again hanging on her chest was very similar.

Natacha was lying down, and she had lifted her head when she heard them enter. Máximo ran to her and grabbed her, pulling her out of bed and throwing her to the floor. He knelt over her and held her down with one hand, squeezing her face and jaw, and with the other, holding her hands. Altea tried to pull him away.

- Stop, Máximo! Stop, please! She's not worth it, my love!

Natacha let them do as they pleased, without defending herself. She listened to Altea, and even seemed to smile under Máximo's hand.

- You fucking bitch! Daughter of all demons! You killed Ariel, you killed Julio!
Natacha was making a noise as if she were choking, her chest was heaving and her legs were trembling.
"Stop, Maximus, stop!" Altea cried, still holding him, but knowing it was impossible to stop him. Men's backs are strong, and with her weak arms and weary body, there was nothing she could do to prevent him from committing the crime he was about to commit. She herself longed to kill him, but she couldn't allow the only man she loved, this omnipotent god she had discovered, to lose his dignity by committing a crime. She knew that a god doesn't punish by taking life, but by prolonging it. The images surrounding them were proof of that.
Then Máximo removed the hand that covered Natacha's mouth. He was breathing heavily, his face contorted with anguish, his body glistening with sweat. She took a deep breath and began to laugh softly, but the sarcasm was so profound that it couldn't be completely eradicated. Natacha's soul was shaped by irony like flowers, utter contempt like the stems that held them, and pain like the roots. Perhaps it fed on rage, and these images proved it: they were furious Christs because they were powerless, unable to remove the nails without suffering again, unable to walk without seeing the blood dripping from their foreheads with the crown of thorns. They saw the world through the holes of those nails, holes where there were no longer bones or flesh, but images of the future: mirrors of the future reflecting the past. Mirrors reflecting mirrors.
Then Máximo got up and began to walk around the room. He felt the hanging crucifixes, turned the images over, and when he came to the money chest he said:
-You threw everything away, everything I worked for all these years...
Then Natacha knew he would open it, she stood up to stop him, but he had already done it.
When he opened the lid, flies flew out, and inside was something that looked like a still-swollen hand, crawling with maggots and already beginning to dry out. He slammed it shut, stifled a gag, and ran out.
Natacha followed him. Altea didn't understand what was happening, but she followed them, slowly and with aching legs.

Máximo climbed the ladder, while Natacha followed slowly, her skirt catching on something and stumbling as she made her way to the deck. He had already reached the edge and thrown the copper into the water. Natacha arrived and clung to the railing as he had seen her do the day before from the shore. He watched her rise slightly and her torso emerge. The black skirts were like a vulture's tail, her arms gripping the railing were its talons, and her torso and head of disheveled black hair were its head and beak. He saw her so clearly in this form that he suddenly recognized the resemblance to the crooked Christ figures he had collected in the towns he had passed through. All the figures people had given him when they still lived in Santa Fe, and all those he had bought in one town or another during the voyage, were just like her, or she was just like them all. A Christ dressed in black, like a pious yet execrable cloak; an effeminate Christ with breasts and a vagina, with thin, hairless limbs; a Christ like a bird that could not fly, an impotent being, and therefore hated. A being that longed for the only god who had given him wings and then torn them away with his death, the god buried in Poland.

Now she was crying instead of laughing. With her head sticking out over the river, her tears fell on the heads of the caimans that came closer to sniff the piece of meat that had fallen in. Altea grabbed her shoulders and gently pulled her down. She put her arms around her waist and led her back to the cabin.

What is solidarity among women, he wondered, if not a flimsy refuge from men? He loathed them both, even the one he loved. But he loathed the one he had once loved even more.

And then she heard his voice. She had turned around, without rejecting Altea's help, suddenly filling her face with that composure she had built up in recent times in front of Manuel.

"I didn't kill any of them. They killed themselves. Everyone knows it. Ask the black woman over there, always waiting for you like a dog in the kitchen."

Then he looked at Altea and stroked the cross.

"I see you recovered it," he said. "The cross has its path, and it travels it with wisdom. The circle of the serpent that devours itself."

"What?" Altea asked.

-Nothing, my dear. While you are pregnant, you will understand less, but you will see more.
Altea refrained from finding any sense in that woman. She would help her return to her room and let her rest. She didn't really know what solidarity among women consisted of; she hadn't felt it for those who most deserved it, like Carmela Espinoza or Aunt Eustaquia de Las Heras, but for this other woman who had done nothing but ruin the lives of the men around her. What was it that bound her to this woman? Were they both in the same circle she had spoken of some time ago, the broken cross, the circle, and the number Pi? It wouldn't be strange if she thought of Manuel, of the way they had lived and spoken to each other all those years. And above all, the way they had parted: ignoring each other as a consequence of oblivion, because it wasn't even contempt. Contempt is the corpse of affection, and that corpse was what they had handed her inside a closed box that smelled of decay.
They entered the room. Altea helped her walk because Natacha said her legs felt weak, and her dress was too loose, causing her to trip over the hem. But she felt that it was Natacha who was actually leading the way. One was very thin, the other was beginning to show a belly, but the thinner one was the one truly guiding her. Her curly black hair framed her pale face, but her gaze was intense.
She left her sitting on the bed while she went to get cold water and a cloth. She helped her lie down and splashed cool water on her face. She unbuttoned the top buttons of her dress and refreshed her chest. Natacha barely glanced at her, as if indifferent.
"What happened to my husband?" she asked. She couldn't take it anymore; she needed some answers.
Natacha opened her eyes and grabbed her hand with the rag. She leaned back on the pillow and sighed deeply.
"After you went to town, Ariel and I had a bigger argument than usual, about the same old things: his drawings, his desire to travel with Máximo. He got really angry this time, I saw him… how can I explain it? I saw him rebelling, and that was because of Máximo, who's always spoken against me. I told him so, and he insisted on following you. I forbade it, and then he jumped into the river to swim to shore, and then, those animals, the caimans… But before that, my dear, Manuel appeared. He'd heard our

cries, and when he saw him jump in, he jumped in too to save him. But it was too late. Manuel was injured because he had the sense to realize he couldn't do anything anymore. The men rescued him, and Julio started treating him. But days passed, and the wounds didn't heal. It seemed they had to amputate, and Ruiz decided to take him to the hospital in Santa Lucía. After you left, I didn't hear anything more."
Natacha looked at her and the cross while she spoke, with some sobs interspersed, searching with her hands for a handkerchief among the sheets.
"Manuel was a good man, my dear, you should be proud. Imagine trying to save Ariel from those monsters. My son's death was my fault, I admit it. I demanded too much of him, and he was weak-willed. He looked like my father, and that's why I thought he was stronger than he was, and I asked too much of him, I think. If you like, blame me for your husband's death too; in a way, it was also my fault."
Then he looked up at the crucifix on the wall above the bed. He made the sign of the cross and said:
"I don't know what happened to Dr. Ruiz, that's the truth. He was risking going ashore, he knew it very well. He did it for Manuel's life. They were very good men, who knew their duty. But Máximo went with you, while we...here..."
He closed his eyes, as if wanting to sleep, but suddenly opened them.
"Don't let go of that cross, Altea, until the day you die. Manuel wouldn't have wanted that. He told me he loved you very much, he even renounced God to marry you, my dear. Imagine that... but what am I saying? You already know very well and you've appreciated it."
Altea felt exactly as Natacha had expected. And that meant seeing her distressed, pacing back and forth in the room, tidying up what Máximo had thrown on the floor, bringing her something to eat, changing her bedclothes, sitting or lying down beside her to hold her hand and ask if she needed anything. Natacha realized that she wasn't doing it for herself, but that every second and every act was a way of compensating for the guilt.
What a wonderful feeling! she thought. No other is as strong or can lead us to so much or so firmly as that one.
The guilt is faithful.

Máximo went down to the kitchen. It was dark.
- Is anyone there? Tomasa?
He heard a movement, perhaps of a chair shifting and falling quickly, and then the groan of heavy breathing. But he had already recognized the black woman's scent before she lit a lamp.
"But it's my boy Máximo!" she shouted, running and hugging him tightly.
"How are you, my dear black woman?" he said, trying to break free from the embrace. Old Tomasa was fatter than the last time he had seen her.
The black woman let go of him, but shook him by the shoulders and grabbed his hands to lead him to sit next to the big table.
"I thought you'd abandoned us! You and your skirts, my dear God..." she said, clasping her hands and shaking her head. "But why are you looking at me like that? Ah, I know! I've gained weight, it's true. It's because I have no one to cook for, so I sit here in the dark, think, and eat."
- And what are you thinking about, my dear?
- Oh, so many things have happened since my child left!
- And what happened?
Tomasa sat down, rested her elbows on the table, interlaced her fingers as if praying, and hit her forehead several times.
"The devil got on this boat, kid. And he's wearing skirts..."
"Come on, come on, Tomasa. I know he doesn't get along with my wife, but to say..." Máximo smiled to reassure the old woman, her heart pounding with anguish.
The old woman clutched her chest just before speaking. Máximo brought her the brandy she always hid in a pantry drawer. She drank straight from the bottle, placed it on the table, and roughly stroked Máximo's face.
-Thank you, my child, if it weren't for you who gave me my freedom.
-Come on, girl. Don't talk nonsense. You were already free when I found you…
"Here, my child, but they were looking for me in Brazil, and there are still some who must remember. The doctor knows... There's always someone who doesn't forget, my child..."
-So you know why he landed…
- Do I know? I was here the whole time, my boy, I saw and heard everything.

The lamp ran out of fuel, and gloom reclaimed its space in the kitchen as she talked and talked, pausing often to cry, wipe away her tears, or take another swig of liquor. Occasionally, she fell silent to see how Máximo reacted to her words, but she had known him since he was a boy and knew he would bottle up every emotion until the moment it exploded. She had heard the movements and shouts from Natacha's room. That afternoon, she had even thought he had killed her, and a great relief had washed over her. But soon after, she heard that voice of hers, like the sound of a sarcastic grimace that sliced through the air around her, creating two incongruous spaces, two forces inevitably destined to clash.

Now the sky was as dark as the inside of the kitchen, but they didn't know it. They couldn't see each other's faces, and yet they knew them perfectly. Her face was etched with sorrow like drops of grease, blackened like the oven beside which she had cooked every day. His face was flushed with anger, and the most obtuse confusion wove tangles around his brain. Then he took one of her black hands and brought it to his lips. He kissed her and said something in a very low voice.

She understood, without answering. She remained alone in the kitchen, surrounded by smells more endearing than any of the men she had ever known. She had waited for her son Máximo to arrive so he could know the truth, and now that she had told him everything, she was at peace. She laid her head on the table and soon fell asleep. She dreamed of the trees of Mato Grosso, the river water, and the dazzling colors of the birds. The Black man who had kissed her and with whom she had spent many nights passed through her dream, as did the white men who had groped her and given her several children whom she killed before they were born. She thought of her mother and her sisters, the long days of work on the plantations, and the aroma of the coffee plant, which she hated and could never stomach. Because she drank rum day and night, for the heat or the cold, because it tasted completely different from coffee.

The sun on bare heads, naked bodies, and coffee in their noses, churning their stomachs and creating the seeds of anger in their hearts, which would spread through their blood over the years.

Black rage like tiny beasts on the fingertips. Beasts of burden or beasts of strength, with only hatred or submission as differentiating factors. A slight

nuance of distinction to create an abyss of behavior. To die or to kill. To kill or to be killed.
And slavery in the middle, transformed into a conciliatory virtue.
The center of mediocrity.
The black woman sank into that abyss that night. In the morning she could not wake up.

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Tomasa's funeral was held on land, but first they had to send for planks and a carpenter. She was too heavy for one of the ordinary coffins. By afternoon, the men had already placed the body on the planks, and the carpenter assembled the rest around it. It took six men to lower her to the ground. Father Leguizamón would officiate again, and they would take the same route as before.
When he asked Altea if she would accompany him, she said no. She had been watching the coffin being made, but she kept going back and forth to Natacha's cabin. The night before, he had gone to the room where he thought he would find her, but it was empty. He went to his wife's room, and when he knocked without answer, he opened it and saw them both lying side by side, still dressed in the clothes from the day before, holding hands, their eyes closed. They looked dead. He knew for certain, then, that Natacha had convinced her, perhaps manipulating the feeling of constant doubt that Altea felt about her husband, a feeling that could easily be identified with guilt.
The six of them—Máximo, Márquez, Beltrame (who had obtained the wood), the carpenter, and two dockworkers—lowered the body. The boat carried the weight of the crate with Tomasa and two other men. The others would come on the next trip. The dog had also climbed aboard.
Then they lifted the coffin onto the cart, helped the priest out of the chapel door, and continued on to the cemetery. The boy wanted to go with them;

he was looking for Altea. Máximo told him he wasn't feeling well and had him sit on the driver's seat next to him. He watched him throughout the journey. Now, looking at him more closely, he thought he recognized certain features of Julio. But when he had met him, alcohol had already taken its toll. Nevertheless, the shape of his face, the way he sat—slouched and taciturn—and even the moderate height that the boy already displayed in the shape and dimensions of his body for his age, made them resemble each other.

"How is your mother?" he asked.

Bernardo shrugged. Máximo knew that she wasn't home much and he managed on his own most of the time.

The ceremony was longer than the other. Many neighbors had followed the procession, and as they dug and lowered the coffin, men and women drew closer until they formed a large group of people scattered among the pastures and graves. Tomasa was well-known and well-liked in the area. As the priest recited the prayers for the dead, sobs were heard. Máximo threw the first shovelful of earth onto the coffin, which, due to the weight, had fallen slightly crooked, and some of the boards had cracked. The men who had lowered the coffin looked at each other, but they wouldn't do anything to fix it. The boy took Máximo's and the priest's hands. They climbed into the cart and returned to the port.

"When do you plan to leave, Captain?" Beltrame asked.

-First I need to get a new crew.

He had seen several of those who had worked for him during the funeral, but he wasn't sure about seeking them out again.

-Also, I need to get the machines ready.

She would spend the night in the chapel that day; she planned to try to find men the following day. The boy lay down beside her, and they were both too tired to talk. Max rolled around and lay down.

In the morning, the dog woke them with licks. They had breakfast with the priest and went out to explore the town. Many stopped to talk to him because they hadn't seen him in a long time. Everyone knew what had happened, but the Hurtado de Mendoza name and his lineage placed him on a kind of accessible, legendary level, someone everyone could see and touch, knowing that Máximo wouldn't mind. The oldest among them had

known him since he was a boy, watched him grow up and ride with his friends. They had seen him laugh and fight, and even saw him walk through the corridors of the now-vanished brothel several times.
Maximo and Bernardo walked side by side, and the dog followed them. He stopped almost every block to talk to someone, hugging them with shouts and laughter, and the occasional playful insult . The boy would stop and listen, or go play with Max, who was sniffing the dirt and wagging his tail. By six in the evening he had already gathered twenty men, ten of whom had abandoned the ship.
"We need the job, Captain, but the lady..." That's what they said to him; he replied:
-I will no longer leave the ship, and she will not bother you.
Some went aboard that same day, with Márquez. The rest would go the next day.
They went to the priest's house for dinner. He asked Father Leguizamón about Bernardo's mother. The priest looked out the window to make sure the boy was playing outside with Max.
"The mother's a whore, you know that," the priest said. "The boy understands everything and knows what's going on. I want you to take him away, Máximo."
-But I can't steal the child from its mother.
"Many times the boy has gone off on his own for several days at a time, and she never complained. He was the one who came back because he couldn't fend for himself. Everyone knows he's Ruiz's son. You can give him a decent future, Máximo. His mother won't miss him; he'll be one less burden for her. She just sleeps, drinks, and has no time for anything else."
When Bernardo returned, they had dinner and went to bed.
In the morning they walked to the dock. The boat was ready. Beltrame squatted down to untie the mooring lines.
"Just give me a shout if anything happens, Captain, you know..." said the priest.
They hugged, and he climbed into the boat. The dog stayed by the boy's side. Bernardo told him to jump in, but Max wouldn't move. Bernardo tried to push him, but the dog lay down. Then Max said to him:
- Don't you realize it's not going to climb up on its own?

Bernardo Ruiz, the ten-year-old boy, looked at him with the same expression of anguish and gleam in his eyes that he had seen in Julio the day he hired him.
Then Bernardo jumped off the dock, and Max followed him.
As he rowed, Máximo Mendoza wondered what kind of man he was. He picked up helpless people only to lose them in a way worse than if he had simply left them alone. What kind of future was he leading the boy toward?

Throughout the week, some men regretted coming aboard, but others arrived, and slowly the new crew group solidified its bonds. They were in better spirits and more willing to work than the previous crew, and they also had more knowledge of the river. Márquez had organized them into groups, selecting two or three with the necessary training to operate and repair the machinery. Day and night, the sounds of hammering and gears could be heard, and when the steam engine was running again, it took several days to warm up and check for any malfunctions.
They would have a long and arduous journey ahead if they wanted to make up for lost time and money. Mendoza had no choice but to win back the clients he hadn't fulfilled and accept every order that came his way. He had sent telegrams from the post office at Corrientes and Paraguay. And in the following days, orders arrived even from Brazil.
Márquez finally told them they could set sail whenever the captain gave the order. Then Máximo announced they would depart the next day. That night the entire crew dined on deck. Máximo said the women would be present, and then the men fell silent.
"I don't want drunkenness or obscenities; the ladies will accompany us. Anyone who doesn't want to can leave."
They didn't understand. Márquez didn't understand. Was he challenging them or the women?
During that week, Natacha had only left her cabin once. They saw her go up on deck and look at the river for half an hour. They greeted her, but she didn't look at them. Altea was walking arm in arm with her.
The day they saw him return with the boy, Altea smiled, suddenly forgetting all resentment, but when Bernardo ran towards her, she didn't greet him. He was arm in arm with Natacha, who, upon seeing him, said:
-Another helpless one.

Maximo ignored them. But the afternoon before dinner with the crew, he went to look for them in their room.
-We're having dinner on deck tonight, ladies.
Altea was making Natacha's bed, while Natacha prayed beside the small altar set up on a table. She glanced at him and he thought he saw the face of the woman he loved again, but he soon slipped away once more.
"Thank you," was all she said.
That night, the men set the table. The boy bustled about, eager to help with everything. Max followed him, accompanied by three other dogs the men had brought along. The table was set, and chairs and benches were added as they sat down. Everyone had bathed and washed their clothes. Their hair was combed, and their beards trimmed. They tried to hold their tongues whenever they felt like swearing. Márquez had tended the fire where they roasted a cow they had slaughtered that afternoon in the village. The meat was ready, and the plates were prepared, but no one dared to start eating without the captain's permission. And he was waiting for the women. He expected them to appear at any moment, some more or less elegantly dressed. He had bought clothes for the boy, and Bernardo had put on his new trousers and suit in honor of the ladies.
They waited fifteen minutes. Maximus told his men not to be impatient, and they began to drink and converse in low voices so as not to disturb the women. They would be given time, and no reason to complain.
Another twenty minutes passed, and when it was late, he got up and walked to Natacha's room. He knocked on the door. Altea opened it. She was wearing her usual dress, and Natacha was lying down.
Aren't they coming?
-She doesn't feel well.
- And you?
-You already know…
- I know what?
-She lost her son, and you replace him with…
- Is that what she says?
-He thinks it, there's no need to say it.
- And is that what you think too?
"That's what I see, Máximo. Besides, look at my condition, I'm not in the mood to have dinner with a bunch of brutes."

And he closed the door.
Maximo stood there thinking, his face two centimeters from the closed door. Max was with him, and he heard him scratching at the door.
"Good," he said to the dog. "The beasts will be free for tonight."

He returned to the deck. It was brighter outside, with the moon and almost all the lamps lit on the long table and others hanging from the ropes strung between the masts. The brightness contrasted sharply with the silence that fell over everyone when they saw him. He knew the men needed this night to release the pent-up emotions of those long days of hard work. But above all, they, like him, longed for the women's approval. He had seen in them a willingness to behave quietly and enjoy themselves without any displays of affection in their presence; it was enough for the women to do them the honor of introducing themselves, accepting their attentions, and perhaps even offering a small smile.
But contempt is met with contempt, they knew that well.
Then he approached the end of the table assigned to him as captain, and without a word, plunged the dagger into the wood. It took no more than a second for everyone to understand, and shouts suddenly erupted, their voices a single breath that extinguished some lamps, but it no longer mattered. Everyone did as they pleased, without a thought for propriety. Those who didn't sit down to eat wandered back and forth on deck, drinking from the bottles. The rum, wine, and other liquors that the captain kept in the hold were constantly replenished. Márquez and another man brought platters of meat from the galley. Some ate with utensils, but most ate with their hands, wiping them on the clothes they had painstakingly washed just hours before.
Maximo sat down, but ate very little. He sipped his wine and occasionally glanced at the boy, who had sat down beside him, watching the men and smiling silently at him now and then. He knew the boy was disillusioned with women, especially Altea, whom he looked at in a way that could hardly be mistaken for anything other than filial affection. But Altea's coldness had returned.
"Come on, Bernardo! Cheer up!" she said, ruffling his hair.
The boy laughed, as if only he were predisposed to agree.
"Eat more!" he insisted.

Bernardo served himself again and Márquez patted him on the back. "That's more like it!" he said, and went back to the kitchen because the others kept ordering.
"Do you want beer?" said Maximus, and poured a glass.
Nearly two hours had passed, and the men were drunk; one was already asleep on the floor, while others sat sprawled out in chairs. Most were still awake, talking loudly as if they were deaf, sometimes pushing and hitting each other.
One of them leaned over the side and vomited. Others approached as if to throw him overboard, but they saw the caimans that had swarmed near the hull. The beef that had fallen into the river had attracted them. One of the men fired a shot, just for fun, and the others thought it was a good game to throw meat at them as bait and then kill them.
Almost all of them did the same, leaning over the side, staggering, and Máximo, who had drunk a lot but was still lucid, feared someone might fall overboard. He stood up and told the boy not to come any closer. He joined the others, pushing his way through their men. By now, they all considered him one of their own and pushed him toward the side. He leaned over and saw in the darkness the white glints of teeth and the water splashing and foaming against the hull. Then he thought of Ariel, the body they had told him had been torn apart by caimans in broad daylight under the intense sun. How clearly they must have seen that carnage. If any of them were to fall overboard now, they would see nothing but the glint of flesh in the unexpected reflection of the moon. And the blood would be indistinguishable in the water in the ship's shadow. They would have heard the screams, surely, but Ariel certainly hadn't screamed; at least Tomasa hadn't mentioned any screams, nor had the two or three men who dared to speak to her about that day. Ariel had thrown himself off on purpose. They had seen him run naked across the deck and jump.
Then he turned around, pushed past the men, and returned to the table. He finished the bottle of wine and pulled the revolver from the jacket that was draped over the back of the chair. He went back to the gunwale and began shooting at the caimans. The others became even more excited and started firing into the river and the air.
Lights came on along the shore, and men and women shouted from the dock. Half an hour passed, and the gunfire lessened, but the shouting

continued. Some men returned to the table and continued eating and drinking. After midnight, the shouting continued; many bottles lay broken on the floor, and part of the table was broken and overturned. Max and the other dogs had hidden during the gunfire, but once they got used to it, they came out to search for the scattered bones. The boy had half-asleep in his chair when he felt someone grab his arm and pull him. He opened his eyes to find himself standing and being pulled along by the arm along Altea, but they weren't going toward the cabins; they were going toward the railing. And he heard her voice, so loud and angry, saying such things that he wouldn't have recognized her if he hadn't seen her in her usual dress, her hair disheveled, and her face flushed, shouting insults at the captain. But of everything she said, he would only remember what she said about him.

- Is this why you brought the boy here?! To teach him this?!

The captain stared at her without answering, his eyes bright and clouded. That was what the boy found strangest. Was the captain going to cry because of her reprimand? Not yet, because he was leaning against the rail, supporting himself with his elbows. His feet were slipping because he was barefoot on the floor wet with beer and blood from the broken glass he'd cut himself on.

She was still screaming and had gone over to him to shake his shirt. Several buttons had come off and Máximo Mendoza's chest was exposed. A group of men had formed around her to watch, but they were so drunk they were laughing at her.

Altea looked at them for a moment and hurled insults at them that they'd never heard from any whore they'd ever met. They often didn't understand her words, because she mixed Danish with slang from the region of Spain where she'd grown up. That's why they laughed, until they too grew tired of that and began to move away. Some lay down to sleep on the deck, others on the table. Their revolvers fell to the floor, empty. But Máximo's revolver had been reloaded. He did it while listening to Altea's screams, glancing at her every now and then, because he didn't need to look at his gun to load it; he knew it too well. It was always the same, always faithful. Altea's face, on the other hand, was unfamiliar to him. The fury on her face was so intense and filled with rage that it was like looking at a witch's face. She talked and talked, spewing contempt from her mouth, never letting go of the boy's arm, as if he were a dog. She used him as a tool for her hatred,

but that's all he was, the instrument that had served to fire her first shot. She didn't have a firearm, but the ten-year-old boy was there, and in his panicked and weary gaze she found argument after argument, a reason for ever-growing resentment.

Máximo Mendoza looked at her with shining eyes, but he wasn't going to cry. He watched her, reflecting her resentment back at him, and faced with the sharp edge of each of the many words he had heard that night from the same mouth he had kissed, he knew he had to answer. And perhaps then she would understand.

He drew his revolver from his waistband, raised it in his right hand, and turned around. He began firing again toward the river.

"This one's for Ariel!" he said.

He knew that she, though now silent, was still standing behind him. He fired again.

"This one's for Julio!" he said, and peered out to see if any animals were still alive. But it didn't matter anymore. There was always someone to kill. Another shot.

- This one's for the black girl!

His voice stumbled and he spat. For a moment, she must have thought he would stop. Máximo had braced himself with his hands on the railing and looked as if he were going to throw up everything he had eaten and drunk. But he didn't.

He raised the weapon again and fired.

"This one's for your husband!" she said.

Then she turned around. She was alone. The boy had broken free and hidden. She looked toward the forecastle, that haughty section from the old days she had preserved like a relic of former splendor. She made out Natacha's shadow, her rigid figure, her dark body against the light, indistinguishable except for the shape of a woman. Yet, for a moment, she thought she saw a vulture. Natacha's arms looked like clawed legs, and her raised, disheveled hair resembled feathers ruffled by the river wind.

When had it landed there? Perhaps it had come attracted by the roast meat, maybe by the dogs, even by the boy. Then it would carry off the unconscious men lying on the floor.

It was necessary to get rid of the vulture.

He raised the weapon once more, but felt Altea's arms pulling him, and since she had no strength, she had clung to Máximo's body.
- No, Max! Don't do it, please don't! I love you, I love you! Don't damn yourself, please, please!
He repeated those last two words as many times as he had uttered so many other angry words before. But they were only two words, and no matter how many times they were repeated, they erased nothing.
The gun was still in her hands, her fingers in position. She had lowered her arm. She placed her free hand on Altea's back and felt the broken, anguished sobs that shook her body.
Maximo stared straight ahead; he didn't want to see her. It was enough to hear the convulsive sobs of her face pressed against his chest, and the sound of her hopeless and futile pleas.
She brought the gun barrel to her right temple, and she heard the firing pin click against Máximo's skin. Again she grabbed his arm, and since it was pressed against her body this time, it was much easier to apply pressure. Altea's hands grasped Máximo's hand, which held the revolver between his fingers, his index finger on the trigger.
He managed to move the cannon away from his head.
She pressed so hard that he suddenly gave in. And he squeezed her hand.
He felt the hot metal and then the gunshot.
Altea's body was still held by his left arm, behind his back. Blood was dripping from Altea's left eye. It covered half her face and ran down her neck, trickling down her dress and staining his own chest as he clung to her. Then he let her go.
He realized that such a great silence had fallen that it seemed to have fallen from the night sky like a silent explosion that had not only eliminated everyone's hearing ability, but had also canceled the sounds of things and elements: the sound of the river, footsteps on the boards, the very breathing of men.
And he was drowning in that silence, that's why he screamed.
That's how he regained his grip on reality. Because what came before was simply despair.

By mid-morning, the men had carried Altea to the cabin she had shared with her husband and laid her on the same mattress that had absorbed so

much of his blood. They carried her from the deck, taking care to protect her head and abdomen, while Natacha stemmed the bleeding and gave instructions on how to carry her and how to prepare the bed.
Máximo followed them, his face pale and contrite. Everyone had seen what had happened, and no one blamed him, but Natacha's imperiousness ignored him and pushed him away from Altea.
None of them were sober enough that night, except the women, of course, but without waiting for the captain's orders, they spoke with Márquez and went ashore to find a doctor. At five in the morning, when it was already getting dark, they found Dr. Estanislao Gonçalvez at his house. They knocked on the door and woke him with shouts. They took him aboard.
In the corridor, the men, now awake and alert but still hungover, paced back and forth, trying to figure out what was going on. Márquez knew he was the only one who could maintain order on the ship before everything reverted to its previous state. There were contracts to fulfill, and they needed the money. Sooner or later, they had to set sail.
Inside, Natacha sat on the bed, washing the blood from Altea's face. The bleeding had stopped, leaving a patch of clots that Gonçalvez recommended covering with bandages. There was only one servant, a companion of one of the men, who helped by cutting clean cloths, fetching water and washing, and enduring Natacha's orders with her head bowed and a frightened expression.
The doctor stood up after finishing bandaging Altea's head and looked at Máximo, who was sitting by the bed with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped. He seemed to be praying, but who knew? Judging by his expression, his thoughts could be as empty as a deluge forming a flood of stagnant water.
"Will he live, doctor?" he asked.
-I don't think it's possible... There's nothing more we can do but wait in the next few hours.
- Is the child okay?
Yes, thank God, but he wouldn't survive if we removed him now; he only has a chance while his mother is alive. If she manages to remain stable until the end of the pregnancy, he could be removed...
- Do you believe...?

-I don't think it's possible, but as I already told you, there's no way of knowing how his damaged brain will react.
"Will she wake up, doctor?" he asked, and saw that Natacha was looking at him.
-Has half his brain destroyed, captain.
The doctor left, and several men gathered around him as he exited. The boy took the opportunity to peek into the room, and since no one stopped him, he tiptoed over and sat next to Máximo. After watching Natacha continue caring for the sick woman for a while, without her paying him any attention, Máximo put his arm around the boy's shoulders and pulled him closer. Embracing like that, she watched them for a moment, continuing to wash and style Altea's hair. Their eyes met, and his troubled expression changed only then.
"I know you'd prefer to see me in that bed," Natacha said, no longer even looking at him, continuing to take care of Altea, taking out the dirty bandages and folding the clean ones to soak them in water.
-You had two great ideas last night, one to point a gun at me and the other to point a gun at your head, and she was involved in both. I don't know what you did to make me love you so much.
The boy watched them, silent and downcast. He knew he didn't belong in that room, but he couldn't escape the emotions it all stirred within him. After a brief silence in which she did not wait for an answer, she answered herself.
"I'll tell you. You're weak, that's why she loves you. And she's very strong. She married a man she never truly loved, imagine that for starters. She lived with the Indians for years. She endured rape. And on top of everything, she agreed to continue with a pregnancy she hates. And now this, to finally end things with her, and she's still alive. Strong people need weak people to love; they can't get together with another strong person because they can't give her anything they don't already have. Manuel was strong; imagine, he gave up the God he thought he would dedicate his entire youth to, for a woman who never truly loved him, and perhaps he knew it."
- Your beloved Manuel! You know what he did to your son.
Natacha didn't look at him, her gaze fixed on the bandages she was crumpling, but she was clearly anxious to avoid something that seemed to

be in her way. Barely shaking her elbow, she said after loosening a lump in her throat:
-He already paid for that.
"And Julio paid for what was his," said Máximo.
-No, that was because of the guy from Buenos Aires, who was there before.
- Do you think God keeps an accounting ledger?
Natacha smiled; she knew that her real husband was waking up from his sorrow.
- And who pays for Julio's case?
-If you want, you can take the weapon back. I'm here and I'm not moving.
The boy opened his eyes, startled.
"You know I won't do it anymore, like you said, I'm weak, and a coward, surely." He ignored Natacha's smile, which showed her delight. "But you're not a woman, you're a bird with hard bones, with muscles as strong as iron and large wings with which you fly over the ship, contemplating us all, and over the river and the land, and over the sea we crossed together so many years ago. And I even think you talk to God, as equals, and you argue and fight without ever reaching an agreement, like a married couple who despise each other."
She now looked at him with astonishment in her eyes, and thought she saw a remnant of that look from when they met in Poland.
"You men think too much, you build beautiful cathedrals of conjecture, but you remain motionless. We women are made of flesh that feels, and we act accordingly."
"The brain doesn't harm anyone," he said. "Only itself."
"Are you so sure, Maximus?" she said, getting up and stroking Altea's head. "The human brain is a graveyard."
The boy listened carefully to everything, each word sinking into his memory. He didn't understand much, but he took in the gestures and intonations. That's how he learned to recognize everyone on that ship. He also sensed a presence in the room, because the dog had hidden under the bed. On the nights he wandered through the village cemetery, sometimes alone and sometimes with other boys, he had seen many shadows moving even when there was no moon. At first, the dogs were the first to refuse to go with them, and then even his companions became too frightened, though they claimed their parents forbade it. But he wasn't frightened by

the shadows or certain noises that could have been nothing more than his own footsteps or the rustling of leaves. What attracted him more than unsettled him was the smell of the wind on certain nights, an aroma of dampness and grass freshly wet with rain or dew, but also tinged with the smell found under stones, of rotting leaves and dead insects. That scent, carried by the wind, sometimes striking his face like a sudden gust, had the peculiar quality of filling his lungs and causing a tickle in his stomach. But it was a sensation that, however unpleasant at first, he occasionally enjoyed, because it reminded him of things he was certain he had never experienced. More than memories, they were simply familiar sensations, both pleasant and unpleasant. Like something that, if repeated too often, becomes bothersome, but that, if present for long periods, produces pleasure because we have missed it. Even pain can be missed if it makes us feel alive, because a part of us is still there after a long absence. Absence seems like abandonment, but sometimes we simply haven't had the right senses to perceive it. Like God, for example, as Father Leguizamón said, whom we believe to be absent because we don't see him.
Right now, in the cabin, listening to the adults, he felt the movement inside him. Like ants swarming all over his body. Sometimes it made him nauseous, but he'd never actually vomited, and it soon passed. That tingling was coming back again as he watched Natacha move around the room, sometimes not moving in a straight line from one piece of furniture to another, but dodging something he couldn't see. He even saw her move her lips without saying a word. And the dog had hidden, and wouldn't come out all afternoon, until the captain grabbed him by his paws and dragged him away. Max had his tail between his legs and was whimpering.

During the afternoon, Natacha didn't move from her cabin. When she wasn't looking at Altea, she sat in a rocking chair and read a book. For many years before, she had read nothing but religious books and biographies of saints, and occasionally two or three medical texts in Polish that she had rescued from her father's library.
In the following days, when she fell asleep, she would wake abruptly, berating herself for her neglect. She would change Altea's underwear, and when mealtimes arrived, she would call out from the doorway for the girl who helped her. Then she would feed her, placing small spoonfuls of soup

and purees in her mouth, and she rejoiced to see that her throat moved and she swallowed without difficulty. Over time, she realized that Altea was not completely unconscious. Her lips moved at the touch of cutlery or glasses, her eyelids, even the injured one, had small reflexes even though they didn't open. When she bathed her, the hair on her arms stood on end, and when she combed her hair, she could hear the faint murmur of pleasure in her throat even though she didn't open her mouth.

That same afternoon they had set sail at a snail's pace, and they had been navigating the murky waters of the flood zone for a week. The captain, the doctor, and the engineer met in Mendoza's office, a workspace for writing letters and reading maps, and sometimes for planning new routes and improvements for the "Juan Manuel's" business. But he had neglected all of that for so long that the desk and the library shelves were covered in dust, and the wooden floor had probably not seen any refinishing since Napoleon's time. There were cracks, and the footsteps of those men stirred up a great deal of dust and attracted many insects.

They sat down in the elegant old chairs and drank some aged sherry. It was ten o'clock at night, after dinner.

"Doctor," said the captain. "We have pressing commitments to fulfill, and we've even received advances granted to me for my family's benefit. But I can't extend the deadlines any further, at the risk of losing everything, including the ship, which is my only source of income. My land is mortgaged and in litigation with my family."

"I understand," said Gonçalvez, savoring the sherry slowly; he probably wouldn't have many opportunities to do so.

-I need to know your opinion on Altea's condition. You told me that a few days should pass. Should we take her to a hospital?

From what I've seen, she's stable, and there are slight, very vague, signs of some improvement. Given the comforts this ship has, I don't see her being better cared for in any hospital around here. I've seen Mrs. Natacha feeding her properly, and I'm amazed by her knowledge. She knows more than many doctors I've met.

Do you think he will regain consciousness?

"I don't think so, and if she does, she'll probably go blind and deaf, and won't be able to move. She'll only be able to maintain a good diet until the end of the pregnancy. She wouldn't survive childbirth, and she'd hardly

survive the surgery. But all of this is speculation. I've seen all sorts of things happen, but it's my duty not to give her false hope."
"That's all very well, Doctor, we understand," Márquez said. "But we should have some guidelines to help us in this situation. We should head north tomorrow."
"I don't see the problem, but I must tell you that I have to leave as soon as you can find another doctor. I have a family and commitments..."
-I was hoping to hire him as a ship's doctor.
-I appreciate the offer, but as I told you, I have a wife and a two-year-old son.
- And where do you think we can find another one?
-I have references for good professionals at the hospital in Corrientes, and I could accompany them there without risking worrying my family.
Mendoza consulted several folders.
We have several deliveries scheduled there next month, barring any further issues. The flooded area we've been navigating provides ample opportunity for our keel to operate smoothly, ensuring the machinery functions without problems.
-Then I'll accompany them...
But he didn't finish the sentence. There was a loud crash against the port side of the hull. They ran to the deck; the sailors were already leaning over the side.
A large fishing boat had collided with them. There were women and a few men on deck. They were shouting and calling for help because it was already sinking.

9

There was nothing else Mara could do. She pondered this for what seemed like an eternity, as they passed the enormous ship whose length appeared

endless. The tall, dark hull was like a silent wall against which they shouted without reply. A wall that seemed to have ceased to be made of wood, taking on the substance of a more ethereal yet stronger material, because it could not be reached and therefore could not be overcome. Like water, for example, a wall of water that had risen in the middle of the river with the silence characteristic of things that seek to isolate themselves from the world.

Wasn't the fishing barge she commanded also an isolated entity on the river, dirty and carrying a lot of corpses, and with a bunch of crazy and sick people as crew and passengers?

They were already approaching the bow of the large ship, and she read the name “Juan Manuel de Rosas.” She had to stop laughing at herself and at all of them, and above all, stop feeling sorry for them. If they were the crazy ones, then those on the big ship were the bad guys. If she thought that way, everything was easier. The actions she had taken throughout her life had been nothing more than ways to survive, even killing was one of them. And perhaps those traveling on the “Juan Manuel” hadn't killed anyone, but they had done something worse: they represented the boastfulness that tramples, the pride that takes precedence over everything, the privilege of a caste that appropriated the world. That very ship was an insult to every town that had been flooded and disappeared, passing over the houses and ranches underwater, damaging the remains with its enormous keel and its enormous indifference. The silence of the large ship was incongruous with the bowed heads of the river's inhabitants, who fished and died, killed and bore children, buried and sowed. A wide and long river that had not yet grasped its power or its future, flowing through a country that was still nothing more than a utopia. Buenos Aires and its grand ideas were far away, and the provinces were a collection of men and women who knew no other name than the town or small city where they lived. And sometimes, not even that. They didn't even know the river's name, because each person called it by the name of their own space: a bend named after a tree or an animal, or it bore an indigenous name, a symbiosis of nature and concept. An indigenous name as a metaphor.

And sailing down the great river that flowed through a country that still remained a metaphor, she knew she had to stop it long enough to board. Mara the conqueror, with her legion of madmen and the sick, and her

cargo of dead. She didn't read very well; she had left Spain almost without knowing how to read, much less write. But she had learned during those last few years, and she could see that on the hull there were still traces of what must have been the ship's old name. " *La Conquete* ," she read, when they were right in front of the bow.

Then she made up her mind. She went to the cabin and grabbed the wheel, turning it to starboard. The barge came alongside the larger ship, and as soon as she turned her head, the bow crashed down on them. The crash of breaking timbers was the first thing she heard, as the women rushed to her, screaming and weeping, insulting her, accusing her of wanting to kill them all.

The great prow was wedged against the barge, and water was pouring in rapidly. She knew the ship's crew would rescue them, but she had no way of knowing if they would do so before someone died. José still couldn't move, and the women couldn't swim. But none of that mattered anymore; a decision had to be made, and she had. The river didn't allow time to think, nor did life.

The men appeared, peering over the side, high above, against the sky. The women huddled together, terrified, watching the water gush from the deck planks, and Valverde and old Tonio were shouting for the men from the big ship. Valverde had seen Mara run to the helm, pushing the old man aside, and somehow he had imagined she would do something as desperate as what she did. Everything about her was like that: decisive and immediate action, interspersed with long periods when she didn't even speak. Now it was no use reproaching her, as long as there was still time for the crew of the "Juan Manuel" to rescue them.

They threw out life preservers, and the women were the first to put them on. Soon they saw the shadow of a boat beginning to descend. Mara couldn't understand anything they were saying; it was all women's screams and men's voices talking at once, and the sound of water rushing in like a waterfall. The wooden planks creaked, and the barge was sinking faster than expected. The cabin where José was had flooded almost halfway. She saw him jump out of bed and try to swim toward the part of the deck that was still afloat.

"Quickly!" Valverde shouted, while she yelled back: "There's a sick person, please, hurry up, he's dying!"

And she realized she was about to cry, and that if José or any of the others died, it would be her fault. She had killed before, but because she had wanted to. And this time, the ship's appearance and the opportunity had simply happened too quickly. Up there were Altea and the boy; that's all she had seen in the middle of the immense ship. José, she, and the boy would conquer the "Juan Manuel."

The boat was already in the water, rocking with the thrashing waves that swirled around the barge. When it finally sank, a treacherous hole would pull them in if they stayed close, along with anyone still swimming. She saw the three sailors rowing against the current as they tried to reach the gunwale. The women didn't dare leave Mara's side, but when the deck tilted too sharply, they let go and crawled as best they could toward the boat, their dresses soaked, clinging to ropes and planks. But the planks kept giving way, and the ropes cut their hands. She would have liked to help them, but that was Valverde and Tonio's job. It was José she had to help, who was trying to get out of the cabin, fighting against the water that was pushing him back in. She saw him grab onto the sides of the entrance, but the water was rising and pushing him back. Then Mara grabbed the chain that had once been attached to the old anchor. She was too heavy for a woman; it always took three or four men to lift her. The water kept rising, but her eyes were fixed on José's face, the man she had struck and loved, in whose body she had found refuge, comfort, and the longing for death. Now she knew what he felt those nights when she watched him sleep restlessly, muttering to himself, knowing that the nightmares he had would never be spoken aloud. To die beside that man's body was the same as to live with that man's body. When she felt him inside her, she was no longer just a woman. As if José's memory penetrated her womb to conceive something that wouldn't have its own body, but something like a cancer that grew slowly. Not destroying, perhaps, though she couldn't be sure, but creating something that was more force than mass. She had been experiencing this for so long, perhaps since the time she had left Spain, and more precisely since those harvest afternoons in the fields with her brother. The same one that had taken her daughter Elsa, who was also her daughter. What would become of them? she had wondered many times over so many years. José was very different, but both their bodies reminded her of the same thing: the ecstasy of flight. She had dreamed of their wings, large, broad, made of

strong bones and membranes. Soaring and looking down, perched on rooftops, her talons gripping the roofing material, whatever it might be—wood, straw, or mud. Her talons tore and created holes, points of vision through which she saw people's heads, the exact point on their skulls that they could never see, the precise center from which sprang the axis around which everyone's bodies rotated, like a world. Worlds that, in turn, revolved in imprecise orbits around each other. Bodies isolated from one another that would never even collide, unless the end of time arrived. But does time have an end? Does a circle?

The number Pi, Mara thought.

She would circle overhead, watching them. They had fed her, and her wings had grown. She had matured like the old women of her village, the ones who called themselves witches. She thought of old Sottocorno, of the hands whose thumbs had traced her face that time. Mara had been frightened and had tried to grab those hands with her own and pull them away from her face. But she hadn't been able to move them, as if they weren't there.

Wings instead of arms.

And Mara suddenly rose above the water. Her arms were raised, one whole and the other broken, but both were incredibly strong. She grabbed the broken chain and dragged it. Anyone watching would have been astonished by her movements, which were at once those of a bird of prey and a woman. Her arms raised, her wide sleeves flattened by the water like membranes, her black hair loose like ruffled feathers, her head moving in sharp, short turns from side to side.

The chain was already beside José, who was sinking into the cabin as if into a vast fishbowl from which he would never emerge. She saw his hands clutch the last link, large and wide. And she rose above the water, but who knows who could see her and bear witness to the strangeness of the event? Perhaps old Tonio saw her, because a while later he would see in her eyes, as she swam searching for the source of a voice on the surface of the water, a question mark that represented the complicity that had always existed between them. But the one who undoubtedly saw everything was the man she was saving. José's gaze, as he surfaced and let himself be dragged along, clinging to the chain, at least until he overcame the force of the water pulling him away from the boat, held a wisdom that could only be

found in absolute bliss or absolute evil. And she knew that the essence of man is the mixture of both, that they only coexist in what is called madness. Madness is their symbiosis, fleeting and alternating with both states that know how to wield time with ease. Sometimes, the exquisite innocence that lasts only a dream; sometimes, the cruelty that protects man like a shield of poisonous thorns. And between these two waking states, the exquisite madness with which José now contemplated her, bound by that chain over the water that separated them by an indeterminate distance: he a man, she something more than a woman.

In the boat, two of the sailors were pulling José aboard, while the other rowed, trying to avoid the current that would drag them toward the sinking barge. The women helped pull him aboard, Mara being the last to do so. Valverde was still aboard the sinking vessel. He had tied a rope to his wrist to help his women, but now only old Tonio and he remained.

"Juan, Tonio! Let's go!" Mara shouted, and the others yelled and swore because there was no time left. The boat was too heavy.

They heard Valverde shouting for Tonio, but the old man was nowhere to be seen. The last time they'd seen him, he was chest-deep in water, swimming toward the cabin. But the cabin was already underwater.

Suddenly, they heard another voice shouting, but it was a young man's. Mara listened closely because he reminded her of someone. At first, it was barely a whisper above the roar of the sea and the creaking of the ship's timbers as it broke apart and sank. She saw that the women had heard it too, and they were looking at each other, intrigued. Who is it? Was there anyone else? No, there was no one else.

"Dad!" came the voice from the water, from some indistinct place that seemed to come from everywhere at once. Sometimes close, sometimes far away, skimming the surface. Then even the men looked around, their eyes fixed on the water, and Mara realized their gazes were trying to pierce the surface. She saw the fear she had seen before in sailors on nights of shipwreck. She knew stories and legends. Tales of those who had died.

"Dad!" came the voice again, much clearer and closer.

The boat had been set free by the force of the waves. Some pushed it towards the ship, others towards the centrifugal force of sinking.

They saw old Tonio's head just above the water, several meters from the boat. Valverde then began to let go of the gunwale and started swimming

toward the dinghy. The waves were covering him. They stretched out the oar for him to grab hold of, and after several attempts, he managed to grab on and they pulled him aboard. Valverde groaned with exhaustion, and the women hugged him and dried him off. It was almost a strange harem in such circumstances, something quite odd when they saw that old Antonio Gonçalvez kept raising his head above water, searching this way and that for the source of the voice calling him.

From the boat they kept trying to shout for him to swim towards them, but he ignored them, as if he couldn't see them. He searched and searched.

- Father!

And the women shivered from the cold, or perhaps from fear. And Mara knew now who was calling her father. The same man who had been with him all this time when they saw him looking around and talking to himself. The man she had killed and thrown into the river.

The old man disappeared underwater. His head never resurfaced from the waves again.

The voice was never heard again.

From the high gunwale of the ship, they called and called. The clanking of the chains and the thumps echoed in the boat, which was being hoisted very slowly with them all aboard. And as they rose, Mara watched the swirling water around the barge, until nothing remained but a whirlpool that quickly lost its strength.

She no longer had wings, but she rose, and the spectacle of the river unfolded despite the approaching twilight. She rose by the weight of chains. Somehow, she felt her arms outstretched and bound. It was a sensation of both strength and powerlessness. Trapped somewhere between earth and sky: that was her. And at last, she accepted it.

*

When the boat reached the board, one of the chains broke, the boat split in two, and everyone fell onto the deck. José was awake, but he didn't have the strength to stand. The women got up, frightened and still hysterical. The sailors helped them, while Valverde had a broken arm from the ropes that had kept him tied to the barge.
Mendoza helped some and others, Gonçalvez assisted the women first, but they had nothing but bruises.
"Relax, ladies!" he told them. "Sit down or go dry off."
The rest of the sailors joined in, bringing blankets and dry clothes, while Márquez spoke with others and pointed out the area of the hull damaged by the collision.
"Is there any damage?" Mendoza asked.
-That's what I want to know, I'll go down and see with some of the men.
-Okay, give me five to help the doctor and the shipwrecked people.
Márquez stepped back, and Mendoza bent over the only woman still lying on the floor. She didn't appear injured, but her clothes were torn and her body was covered in wounds. She was breathing heavily and opened her eyes with a start when Máximo touched her.
- Are you okay? Can you get up?
She broke free violently and got up quickly, but in pain.
"I regret the death of your captain," said Maximus.
Mara looked at him as if she didn't know what he was talking about. Then she wanted to laugh, but her face hurt too much.
- Old Tonio? He wasn't a captain, sir, he was the engineer.
"So the captain is the gentleman?" said Máximo, pointing to Valverde who was sitting, clutching his broken arm while the doctor splinted it.
Mara wanted to laugh again, and this time she couldn't help it, even though her whole body ached.
- Valverde? Don't make me laugh, Captain, because I suppose you are Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza, the owner and master of this Napoleonic monster.
Mara looked at him with her hands on her hips, as if recovered from the pain and all the signs of sadness that had troubled her in recent weeks. Those who listened to her and knew her realized that she had regained her insidious and sarcastic personality.
"I am my own captain, sir," he said.

-Then you are responsible for the death of that old man, and for the damage he has caused to my boat.
Maximo had accepted the challenge that woman presented him. He was fed up with her. In Mara's face he saw a different face, but her words were different, more open and sincere, and that's why he could talk to her.
Mara gasped in amazement and issued another challenge.
"So I'm responsible? And what about you driving this monster like you own the river, running roughshod over the poor fishermen? Look at this man's arrogance! Just because he comes from a wealthy family, he thinks he owns the country."
Mendoza grabbed her arm and told one of his men to take her to the rest of the women.
"Let them dry off and give them dry clothes, even men's, and let them sleep. I'll talk to you later," he said to Mara, as they took her away.
Máximo looked at the destroyed boat. He approached José, who was still lying on the floor, and Gonçalvez, who was examining him.
"What's wrong with it?" he asked.
-Now he looks exhausted from the shipwreck, but he shows signs of having been ill; he still has bruises and fractures that have not healed yet.
Mendoza looked at Valverde. He knew the man by reputation. He'd been told to beware of traffickers, but he was used to those by now. He wasn't going to mess with the ones who sold weapons to the Indians or smuggled them to and from Brazil. The only one of any real importance had disappeared more than a year before, and he'd been told his name was José Iribarne. He never got around to asking Manuel if he might be related; there was never time for that. However, he'd heard about Valverde in Buenos Aires, and especially in Santa Fe. He was a trafficker of white women, and drugs, too. They said he was a clever madman, because he put on a show and deceived everyone, even those who knew him well. He'd even heard that he knew about poisons and, of course, their antidotes. Was he a doctor? No, he only performed abortions, and often cured the sick. He set bones, and that's why he'd reluctantly accepted Gonçalvez's help now. Was he a pharmacist, perhaps? "Or a chemist?" "None of that," they answered many times. He was a simple charlatan who had no more money than what he carried on his person. His wealth lay in the women he transported from one town to another, and the herbs he carried in one or

two saddlebags. No one knew what they contained, but when he opened them, the scent was more than exquisite, it was intoxicating. As if by simply smelling that aroma, or that vague mixture of spices, one saw the face of Valverde de Amusco in a different light. One's body ceased to be a skeleton and transformed into something ethereal that could hover a few centimeters above the ground.

Mendoza had laughed at those hallucinations, because he too had once tried those herbs. And with all that baggage of precautions, which he now considered very useful upon meeting Valverde for the first time, he approached him and said:

-I'm glad you only suffered a broken arm, my friend. May I speak with Juan Valverde from Amusco?

The other one extended his right arm, the healthy one, and smiled with the full width of his tired face.

- And do I have the pleasure of meeting Captain Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza?

They shook hands.

Please excuse my friend Mara's manners. We've had many incidents on our trip.

"Tell me, Valverde. How did you suddenly get in the way of the 'Juan Manuel'? You can't tell me you didn't see us, and your barge was much easier to steer than ours."

"That's if the rudder's working," Valverde said. He didn't know what excuse Mara would come up with when they asked her; he had to see it first. "Old Tonio was trying to fix the machinery after the storm. Mara and her men rescued the women and me. We owe them our lives," she said, her face etched with sorrow.

Yes, Mendoza said, he's a great con artist who gets along with everyone.

- And who is the sick person? The doctor says he has been seriously beaten.

-The gentleman is José Menéndez Iribarne, a Spaniard from a good family. As far as I know, he has done a lot of business along the coast.

What a small world, Máximo said to himself. He hadn't even been able to restart his journey or resume his work, and he already had two traffickers on board: one of arms and the other of prostitutes, and who knows who the woman was.

It was already midnight. Mendoza was in his office, sitting at his desk with folders of pending assignments. Some had already been paid in advance; for others, he had good references and knew he could collect without worry. But news of uprisings kept arriving from Buenos Aires, and the 1890 revolution had shaken up all the political landscape. He, who understood nothing of it and had no interest in it, was lost and at the mercy of those he trusted almost blindly. He thought of Congressman Farías, who, after so much time, had finally managed to exploit Ruiz, like a chameleon surviving and strengthening his party by resorting to anything, even his family drama. If he became president, not only would the Litoral region rise up, but a large part of Cuyo as well. There would be war, again, and Mendoza didn't trust his usual scruples. His private life was a tragedy caused by himself most of the time, but when it came to public life, scruples of honor and good morals arose.

He leaned on the desk, pushing aside the papers that represented the future. If there's war, he told himself, I have the most important man on board who could help me. He had heard many rumors that Iribarne was bringing weapons from abroad, mainly from Brazil. Ships arrived in Rio from Spain sometimes, and other times from the Congo, laden with weapons. How else would the Paraguayans have survived the final years of the war? Iribarne was a newcomer and had made a lot of money in that time. Did he own land, perhaps? Nobody knew anything about him; he wandered from place to place until he settled in a town in Entre Ríos, and then he disappeared.

Márquez proceeded to give him a report on the damage. There were no punctures, only external damage. The fishing barge was old and had splintered like a nut.

-Tell the men that we're setting sail tomorrow, without fail.

- With these people, captain?

-With what we have, old man.

Márquez left and silence returned. The night was too quiet. The women must be asleep, exhausted. The men had been rowdy at first around the prostitutes, even though they were soaked and dirty. Then they calmed down and went back to work.

He buried his head in his crossed arms on the desk. The rum was useless to him now. He was tired of alcohol too. Everything still tasted the same: the

drinks, the women, the work. But everything now felt like a swarm of weariness that surrounded him and incessantly bothered him. Only this silence at this hour of the night seemed unrepeatable. He looked up and surveyed the books on the shelves. Some were relics from the old days, moth-eaten and with loose pages. Others Natacha had brought: science and religion books, just like in her father's library in Warsaw. Many times he'd been tempted to throw them in the river, but then he remembered that Ariel also used them.

He remembered another library, Aurora Valverde's. The surnames were repeated with unsettling insistence, almost extravagantly. His ship and he seemed to draw them in, as if he were destined to be the point of convergence for many things: but what? Surely it was in the books, but he would never have time to read them. Máximo Mendoza was one of those who played the role assigned by some playwright who rejoiced in being cruel to his characters, simply because he was outside the play. God, perhaps? But isn't even God also a character, and aren't all his creations contained within Him? He had once spoken with Ruiz, in that same office, one night when the doctor was reminiscing about his student days in France. He had seen many mentally ill people, and he described the way they talked and talked about their inner demons. And then, after many hours, and sometimes for a few days, those men and women would behave like normal beings. It was as if, by speaking, they expelled the great dramas of their lives, and then the pressure in their minds was relieved, like draining an infected pustule. Then the dramas would reappear, growing in very different ways and at varying speeds. They were a cancer that could never be removed, because it wasn't a mass in their brains but a collection of diseased ideas. Madmen, he said, are masters of abstraction. They don't need much imaginative talent, because the capacity to create practical worlds lies not there, but in the capacity to construct concepts. Imagination is often fantasy, whereas concepts are championed by reason. He thought of Julio Ruiz, and he imagined him sitting across from him, aged, battling his addiction, his gaze grateful to the man who had rescued him. Those eyes, my God, Máximo thought. Julio's eyes held the tenderness of a boy and the tragedy of a dead man. In those eyes, he could have seen, if he had looked more closely, the rifle and the bullet that had ultimately killed him. He thought of Ruiz's son. Bernardo was always there: the night

of the shooting at Altea, in the room while they were tending to her, during the rescue of the shipwrecked sailors. No one, however, paid him any attention. Those who didn't know him might have thought he was the son of one of the men, and the others were already too accustomed to his silent presence, because he didn't like to speak to anyone except the dog that kept him company. Max, as always, behaved like a human being: at first, he had grown attached to Altea and Manuel. Then he had followed them to Mendoza and Altea. He had endured every situation in the towns. Then, when they returned to the ship, he drifted away. Perhaps he missed Ariel, and that's how he saw him wandering from one corner of the ship to another, disappearing for days at a time, perhaps hidden in some unknown nook of the enormous vessel. But suddenly he had found in Bernardo someone who spoke to him, sometimes only with glances. He had observed that as they grew closer, their silence became more profound: the boy's terse conversation wasn't a lack of intelligence, but rather its distillation; and the dog's silence wasn't meekness, but the consolidation of an idea. Animals don't think, they say. Animals don't feel, they say. Animals don't have souls, they say.

Máximo Mendoza knew nothing about the other animals, but he did know that dogs not only smell the impossible or hear the architecture of silence, but they see what we cannot see. They cry at the apparent nothingness, whine at the impending thunder of a gunshot, and bark when a leaf stirs and there is no wind.

Max.

Maximum.

Altea had given him her name, before she met him.

In that semi-death that he had given her, perhaps the images of the dog crossed her mind, running, barking at her, calling her.

He glanced at the old grandfather clock on the wall. The clock had struck midnight more than an hour ago. He was sleepy, and he'd probably be there all night. He heard soft knocks at the door. Who else could it be at this hour but Márquez with some new problem?

- Happens!

The door opened with strange timidity. A woman's head peeked out, her dark hair tied in a messy bun. He recognized her eyes, a mix of green and gray.
-Excuse me, captain.
- Ah, the woman from the boat!
She entered and closed the door, now without any pretense. She walked to the desk and extended her left hand. Then Máximo realized what he had overlooked that afternoon: the woman was missing a hand.
"That's right, Captain, I'm 'the woman from the sunken ship.'" She tried to smile as if she were slightly embarrassed by the challenge in her voice, but she couldn't help it. "My name is Mara Aranguren."
Mendoza shook his hand firmly, firmly, but it was small. It was almost like shaking a small animal full of sinews that was struggling to break free.
- How can I help you? We're setting sail very early tomorrow…
"Yes, I know, Captain. But I couldn't rest knowing I owe you a great debt of gratitude for rescuing us. It wasn't your fault you rammed us..."
What sarcasm, Mendoza thought. Who is this woman?
The rudder was broken, and we could see it coming from over a hundred meters away, but nobody answered. At one point, it occurred to me that it was a ghost ship, like an apparition from another time. The size, the silence, you know what I mean…
"What do you need?" he asked again.
- What do I need? Nothing, just to thank you for hosting us and for the medical attention for my husband…
- And who is her husband?
-The sick man, captain. José Menéndez Iribarne.
They both fell silent.
"They're fine, I admit we're not overdoing it. But that doesn't make a difference to my level of concern, does it?"
Mendoza stood up from his chair and stretched. He didn't cover his mouth when he yawned. His shirt was open to the middle of his chest and his belt was loose. He wasn't wearing boots, which stank under the desk.
"Look, my lady. Let me be very clear. I know what you all do for a living—I'm referring to Valverde, Iribarne, and yourself—and I couldn't care less about those women as long as they don't interfere with my men on my ship.

On land, they can do whatever they like. If Iribarne doesn't recover soon, we'll leave him in the hospital in Corrientes."
"You don't want us on board, I see. We're undesirable to you and not enough for this luxurious relic."
Mendoza placed his thumbs in his belt and asked, his forehead furrowed:
"Who are you, ma'am? I don't recognize you. I mean, sometimes you seem like a criminal, other times you speak like a pretentious old lady. But I don't see any sincerity..."
Mara sat down in front of the desk.
"Excuse me," she said, exaggerating the gesture of adjusting her dress as she sat down. "I am Spanish, Captain, just like José, and your parents."
"I'm not talking about their affiliation, but about their plans. Getting in the way of a ship of our size..." He shook his head as if astonished by the excuse she had given him. "Then coming to see me at this hour to beg me not to turn them over tomorrow and to hand them over to the authorities."
Mara crossed her legs, rested one elbow on her knee, and her head in her hand. She listened to the priest's sermon like a parishioner. When he finished, she said:
- May I ask you something, Captain, or Reverend, if you prefer?
Máximo felt like dragging her out of the office and off the ship. He silently restrained himself.
"Do you know Manuel Menéndez Iribarne?" José has been looking for his brother and sister-in-law for a long time. They taught the indigenous people in a small town in Entre Ríos, but he lost track of them when they returned to Spain.
Mendoza sat down. He already knew that all these events weren't coincidental. Did coincidence even exist after he'd met Aurora Valverde? Was this woman before him, perhaps, something different from the other?
-I knew him, that's right. I'm sorry to tell you that he's dead and buried in the town we left behind.
Mara made a face of sorrow that no one would believe, and said:
"I don't know how José will take this news; he's very close to his brother. And his wife?"
-He is with us, but unfortunately very ill.

He felt so stupid giving those explanations. He would have liked to be crying and hurting himself by saying all that, and yet, like every faker, he remained unscathed and resolute behind his desk.
"But what happened to them, for God's sake?" Mara said, her eyes filled with concern, but he saw that behind that mask lay mistrust. Now Mara Aranguren was quite beautiful. She was strong, with a slender and well-formed body. She knew how to control her expressions to hide what she was really after, but her voice often betrayed her. She didn't handle sarcasm well. When she had to pretend, she came across as ironic. Perhaps that flaw was the only trait that saved her from true malice.
How to answer what you didn't even know for sure? A death caused by a series of physical tortures inflicted over weeks, or was it a death where that man had punished himself? And then the gunshot that had left Altea almost dead.
No one outside that ship knew the truth, and now this strange woman, who hid more than she revealed, was coming to ask him all these questions. Could it be, he wondered, that she already knew, or at least suspected? That's why that conversation in the middle of the night, both of them sitting at a desk with papers that promised a future, but that might never move from there, like in a cemetery. Surrounded by books that no one read anymore. The dull chime of three in the morning rang. That call was ironic. Who had wound that clock for the last time?
The doctor told us they were shot, he doesn't know by whom. They had come down to the village while we were robbing the place. They called him to treat them. Mr. Manuel died instantly, Mrs. Altea was very badly wounded. We're taking care of her because she's pregnant.
Mara's face changed. That's how he described the transformation. The sorrowful expression vanished, taking with it the wrinkles on her forehead and the tension in her lips, and he even thought he saw that the contours of her face were different, because the previous expression had lengthened her features, and now they had become rounded again, just like that afternoon. Even her hair seemed to become less soft, and stood out with loose strands that fell over one side of her face.
- I suppose they didn't catch the criminals, did they?
My God, Mendoza thought, contemplating that smile on Mara's face. A closed-lip smile that only Natacha could have rivaled.

Mara didn't wait for a reply; he looked too tired, and she let the captain rest his head on the desk. He soon fell asleep. She walked out onto the old, dirty, worn imperial carpet, trying not to make a sound. She had blown on the desk lamps, casting shadows. As she left, she knew the lights on her path were already on.

*

He woke before the sun. He looked at the grandfather clock. The six faint chimes were ringing. He heard the growing hum of the machinery, the voices of the men arriving out of sync, and then he felt a hand trying to shake him by the sleeve.
Bernardo looked at him, saying:
- Captain, we've set sail!
She stood up, stretching, and smiled at him.
- How did you get up so early?
-I slept with you, captain.
- Here?
-Yes, on the carpet, under the desk.
Mendoza recalled last night's visit.
- Did you hear what Mrs. Mara said?
He feared that Bernardo had heard about his father's death. Máximo had already told him who Julio was, but not about his death.
- What lady? Only Mr. Márquez came, and then nobody else.
Maximo set aside his worries and they both went on deck. The ship was moving at a good speed. They had left behind the town they had been standing in front of for so long. The river was still extremely wide from the floods. Only the tops of the trees were visible on the banks. Debris from houses floated around, along with many dead animals. The smell of decay was overwhelming for the corpses he saw floating by. He looked over the

side and saw a large boat tied up at the stern, full of bodies. And standing on top of them all was Juan Valverde, spreading lime over the corpses.
"What are you doing, Valverde?! Who authorized you to tow that thing?! Get back on board or we'll set you adrift along with the boat!"
Valverde looked up. He seemed to listen carefully, but he didn't answer. Máximo saw Márquez and two others approach and watch.
"You know, Captain. I told you when you were shipwrecked that you wouldn't agree to tow you, but you said it was your job, so you jumped into the water, swam with one arm, and retrieved the boat's mooring line. You came back and tied it to our stern."
- Aren't the whores he takes around enough for him?
"I think he likes this trade better than the white goods one. He knows what they say about him. They've called him a doctor, an anatomist, even a magician."
Mendoza made a gesture of boredom.
-Cast off the moorings. If he wants to take them and sell them, let him row.
Then he heard Mara's voice behind him.
"Captain, please let him do his job. He won't hinder your journey, I assure you. Besides, those bodies will be used for study at the hospital where he's taking them."
Maximus saw her again, as in the night, ever-changing. Now, however, it wasn't sarcasm, but a feigned plea for pity. He was going to refuse, of course, but looking her in the eyes, he said:
Don't think you're going to convince me again...
- Again? When did I do that?
-I mean last night, it's as if we've already had this conversation, isn't that enough for you?
"I don't know what you mean, Captain. You must have dreamt about me," he said, putting on a face of offended virtue. "I don't know if I should take that as a compliment..."
They were looking at each other, and Mendoza hadn't even noticed that Márquez and the others had left murmuring and laughing.
- What can I do to pay for our passage? Cook for the men? Clean the deck? That's what we women are for.
"Take care of your man," she replied.

José is much better; you'll see him up and about soon. But I have some free time, and the girls want to be kept busy. I've been told there's a seriously ill girl. Can we see her?
Maximo stepped aside and began to examine the river and the waters. It was cloudy, but it wasn't going to rain. The humidity was intense, and the smell of the bodies was just as strong even though they were in the stern. He approached the booth and shouted:
- More speed! We need to get to Corrientes as soon as possible.
He turned around, hands behind his back, standing upright and trying to show annoyance, but he tripped over the boy and Mara, who were following him like dogs.
- Always in the middle!
"Excuse me, Captain," she said. She was holding Bernardo's hand. The boy asked:
- Can we see Mrs. Altea?
He had already realized that Mara had won him over. The boy needed to cling to a female figure, and in place of Altea, he had found this woman. Mara now wore a mask of good manners, and he couldn't see behind it to discover her true intentions. Last night he had seen them with a certainty he believed unshakeable, yet now he doubted that night as he had always doubted his dreams. But he was sure it hadn't been a dream. So what: a lie from her, and had the boy lied too? No. He had been as wide awake as the night he shot Altea. It was the same feeling of inevitability, of unyielding reality. He knew it had been Mara Aranguren who had visited him last night, and so was this woman who looked at him with a submissive face, and also the other one who had sunk his barge and shouted and berated like the most reprehensible of sailors. And the woman who, he was told, tied up his sick man and pulled him aboard.
"Let's go," he said.
They walked across the deck to the gangway and descended to the cabins. He knocked on Altea's door, and one of Valverde's women answered. Natacha was sitting on the bed, feeding Altea spoonfuls of tea. Altea was reclining with pillows supporting her back. As always, she was motionless, but her breathing was soft and steady. She still had a bandage over her face, covering her left eye. Her hair had been cut, and only strands peeked

out from behind the bandages. Another woman was washing the bandages that had been changed a short while before.
The one who had opened the door for them was very young.
"Carla," Mara said, coming in and taking her arm as they walked straight to the bed. She was back to being the woman who didn't use preamble or ask permission to do or say what she wanted. "How are you?"
Natacha looked at them as if resigned to enduring the intrusion of those women, but they were of great help to her.
"Same as always," Natacha replied.
The boy sat on the bed and kissed Altea on the cheek. The bandages got stained every day, and as soon as they were changed, they were stained again before the hour was up.
"When will the doctor come? We haven't seen him for two days," Natacha asked Máximo, with all the acrimony she always tried to use when speaking to him.
"It's my fault, ma'am," Mara said. "The doctor has had to treat a friend's broken arm, and my husband has been very ill. Carla, what are you doing sitting there!" she suddenly ordered, pushing the girl. "Go and get the doctor!"
Maximus approached cautiously. He hadn't dared to look Altea in the face for a long time, and even now he was afraid to look at her, even though she was unconscious.
Mara started talking, but he wasn't paying attention anymore. He talked about his travels, his life in Spain, the flood. Sometimes he laughed at his own jokes, ignoring Natacha's sullen face. One sat on each side of the bed, tending to one side of Altea's body. They had already washed and changed her very early. Natacha set aside the cup of cold tea, and Mara went ahead to dry her lips and chin, even the neck where the liquid had spilled. Altea couldn't open her lips on her own; it was only possible to do so by gently pushing with the spoon.
Dr. Gonçalvez entered and the women, except Natacha, surrounded him.
"How was your night?" he asked.
Natacha said she behaved very well, she hardly needed changing more than once a day. Gonçalvez frowned.
- Did he eat anything?
Natacha got out of bed and rubbed her hands anxiously.

-Spit out the puree...
She wouldn't admit in front of everyone that she didn't know what to do anymore. Altea was losing weight very quickly, and her swollen belly was like a steep hill in dry land.
-I was afraid this was going to happen...
"Isn't there another way to feed her, doctor?" asked another of Valverde's women, named Carmen. "I had a paralyzed grandmother, and while I opened her mouth, my mother put mashed food in it. At first she choked, then she spat it out, but little by little she started to swallow."
"But I suppose her grandmother was conscious, and what this woman has is complete brain damage. I can give her an IV and injections, but she won't make it to term, not even seven months. And there are at least two months left, and she won't make it..."
Gonçalvez listened to his chest and then his abdomen. Everyone was silent.
"How is the child?" Mendoza asked.
-It seems to be going well, but...
"Yes, we know, doctor..." Mara had said this, once again abrupt and domineering. "You've said it many times. I'll take care of the lady, and you'll see how she goes through with the pregnancy and we'll deliver the baby."
The women looked at her without suspicion. The men looked at each other, incredulous. And at that moment another person entered the cabin, whose door hadn't been closed. Max was there too, but sitting by the door, not entering.
Valverde approached with his arm in a sling and his other hand shaking the lime dust off his trousers.
"What are you doing here?" said Máximo, ready to take him out, but Valverde got there first.
"Don't worry about the dead, Captain, they're still silent. If I were you, I'd worry about this woman and her son. Perhaps Mara and I can do something to repay you for rescuing us, and of course, for the trip and lodging on your ship."
The doctor said:
-Captain, I already told you a few days ago that I have a family and I must leave the ship...
-I know, Goncálvez, but we don't have anyone...

"Goncálvez, doctor?" Mara asked, exchanging a glance with Valverde.
-That's right, Estanislao Gonçcalvez.
- From Brazil, doctor, from Sao Paulo?
The doctor looked at her curiously.
- Do you have a relative named Antonio?
-I have many, but an uncle with that name came to Argentina many years ago.
Mara and Valverde laughed and celebrated the coincidence.
"Old Tonio, who died in the shipwreck, was your uncle, Doctor," Valverde said. "It's a pleasure to meet you, and it would be invaluable if you could stay with us to help the sick woman."
-But I already told you I have a family…
Mara approached the doctor, tall and thin, so different from her uncle. She placed her only hand on Gonçalvez's arm and said:
Send them a note, and his wife will understand. His son is very young, isn't he? His duty, it seems to me, is to us and to them. Or am I mistaken?
Gonçalvez followed the direction of Mara's gaze out of the cabin, and sensed, or rather knew, that she was referring to the stern, and beyond it.
Valverde approached the doctor, even taller than Valverde's muscular body.
"Their family in Brazil misses those who have left; I've known them for a long time. I did business with them all over the world. During the war, they made a name for themselves."
The women of Valverde already knew what he meant, but Natacha looked at him with curiosity.
"What does your family do for a living, doctor?" he asked.
The doctor swallowed and did not answer.
"To the funeral procession," Valverde replied, patting the doctor on the back.
- And you became a doctor?
Mara spoke to calm the other.
-Perhaps he wanted to avoid the inevitable, ma'am; many people insist on doing that until they realize it's impossible.
The doctor's eyes gleamed. Bernardo approached and grabbed his hand, pulling him by the arm out of the cabin. The dog joined him, nipping at the sleeve of his other arm.

When she left, Carla said:
-They were very cruel to the poor doctor….
"And what do you know?" Mara said, giving her a dirty look, as she always did since she had gotten involved with José.
"Everyone out of here!" Natacha ordered. "This looks like a tenement in Buenos Aires. Out, out!" And she began to push them out one by one.
But Mara remained still and their eyes met.
"I think we should share the tasks, ma'am. She needs both of us."
Natacha met someone for the first time, someone she couldn't see beyond their face. She sensed there was much more behind that ever-changing visage, because even though it was always the same face, the expression in their voice altered the impression. When they were alone and the door closed behind Máximo Mendoza, she sat back down in the rocking chair where she used to keep vigil over Altea. Mara sat on the other side of the bed.
It was very early in the morning, and the sun didn't shine through the sealed window. There was a smell of confinement and blood.
Mara and Natacha continued to look at each other, taking turns. When one noticed the other looking at her, she lowered her gaze, and the other did the same. They both knew they were being watched.
Mara saw a dark halo around Natacha, as black as the dress she was wearing. Her hands were stained with dried blood after changing the bandages, and also under her fingernails, as if they had been soaked for some time. She saw her lips moving as if talking to herself, but then she realized she was looking to the side, toward the dark corner behind the rocking chair. And that chair was moving, but Natacha's feet were still.
Mara thought she saw a smudge on the back of the chair, actually a shadow in the regular shape of a hand, which was perhaps rocking her.
-I was wondering if you and the captain have had children.
Natacha didn't deign to look at her.
-I'm glad she's not alone…
Then Natacha looked at her closely and saw Mara in the middle of a circle of women who were arranging her hair and dress, washing her face and body, alternately naked and covered. Natacha wasn't used to having such daydreams, because she knew that's what it was all about. She even heard some squawking and involuntarily turned her head toward the ceiling. She

also smelled the scent of dirty feathers and looked, like an idiot, at the floor. And she realized with fear that Mara was now watching her without looking down, surrounded by that halo of strange women who had begun to gather behind Mara's body. They seemed to be working meticulously. Perhaps it was the dress zipper that had stuck, or a seam that had come undone? Suddenly, she heard a flapping of wings. She looked at the ceiling, frightened; she was even tempted to go to the door, but she stopped herself. The hand that rocked her had disappeared; she called for it, but knew it would not return because it had fled to the back of the corner, shrinking and taking the form of a premature baby.

Mara frightened them all, without even moving a finger of the only hand she had left, now resting on the sheet.

Natacha remembered that not long before, she and Altea had been caring for Manuel in that same way, one on each side of the bed. Now the roles were reversed, but the situation was very similar.

Altea's eyelids moved, without opening. Her ears listened and her eyes moved.

They knew that Altea was dreaming.

*

She saw them side by side, the doctor tall and thin, like a skeleton whose joints creaked stridently in Altea's ears; the boy short and stocky, with very dark skin and curly hair. And beside him, the dog, its tail between its legs and its head held high, looking from one to the other, its tongue lolling out, whimpering in a tone no one but her could hear, for it was amidst the echoes of what was forever lost. She also heard the creaking of the planks they used to sit on by the gunwale. The doctor's legs seemed to have too many legs, and he rested his elbows on his knees, his hands clasped, looking at the boy as he began his story. The other one, after a while, sat down on the damp ground, his pants always wet (how come he never got

sick? His body must be used to his escapades through the jungle and the river, poor boy, without a father and with such a mother...) (that's what she used to say when she could still walk and sit and watch him play, and even scold him for taking his clothes off to jump into the river...the caimans, by all the gods, and she imagined the red water they'd told her about) but now the sky was bright, the river calm, and the ship's engines roared like she'd never heard them before. However, the doctor's words (or was it the undertaker's?) sounded clearly distinguishable; she could almost see them written in the air as he spoke them. Now she knew why she could hear them despite the outside noise: she no longer had ears, but new eyes. But wasn't his left eye bleeding? Wasn't it just pure pulp bleeding like an overripe strawberry? He didn't know the cause, but he saw with his dead eye, beyond the room: the sky, the river, everyone's simultaneous conversations written in a book of infinite pages. There's a legend, the man said, in my country, back in São Paulo, they tell a lot about the Indians. It's a city, but the cobblestones are made with stones taken from the stone cities of the Amazon, for example, but also from this very river we're on. The northern Paraná is a mystery, where does it begin? The boy couldn't answer, and the doctor smiled at him. Nobody knows, because it has multiple births, just as it has multiple deaths. Once I was told the story of its birth. I heard it in the raspy voice of a drunken Frenchman who was in a general store in Bon Jesus, a lost little town. He had gotten stuck there because he had no money, and he slept on the floor. Since he got drunk, he couldn't work, and since he didn't work, he had nothing else to do but get drunk. But he told lovely stories, and often mixed them up, creating new legends that no one knew if they were his own imagination or those of the Indians he'd heard them from. Or if they were true, the boy said. The doctor looked at him for a very long moment, so long that she thought she'd fallen asleep. It wasn't a pause of a day or a year, but of ten seconds, but time was long for her, so long that it seemed not to exist. A laugh and a compliment for the boy's answer. The dog wagged its tail and continued listening. That Frenchman liked animals; I don't know if he was a veterinarian, although I deduced that he was, because he mentioned university towns all over Europe. (The doctor stroked Max's head.) Anyway, it turns out there was a big egg somewhere in the jungle, an inhospitable place that no man had ever visited. A virgin place, boy, if you know what I

mean. Men's hands and feet are called limbs, and the other limb we have (he said, touching his groin) is not as harmful as the other four. This one, he said, and touched himself again, hurts women, but creates men, the same ones who will be born with legs and hands that will destroy the place where they were born. Trees crush one, but not a generation; the river drowns many, but not a race. Then, in that place as innocent as an intact hymen (he saw the boy's intrigued expression, confused and even somewhat frightened—he who wasn't so easily scared by anything), the great egg lay among large branches and held upright by three dead trunks. So you see it, standing in that position that no egg could maintain on its own. There it was, in the middle of the jungle. And what was inside? the boy asked. The doctor cleared his throat, and Altea covered her nonexistent ears from the noise, because it was like a series of thunderclaps echoing in the void. Who knows, she replied. Legend says the egg was eternal: the origin of everything? The center of the universe? The great egg remained unharmed and untouched; no one knows its color or exact size. It could have been as tall as a tree, or perhaps taller, or as small as a quail's egg. The point is, a snake appeared one day. (Priests rejoice, my boy, when the symbols they've stolen and pass off as their own reappear.) The snake then wound round and round the egg, advancing a little at each stage of time, because it made its journey in a concentric spiral. Perhaps it was one centimeter per century, so the Frenchman, who liked old wine, claimed. (The doctor's laughter was worse than his throat-clearing, and Altea frowned her broken forehead in pain.) However it happened, it drew closer, and finally raised its head, its jaws opening wide, ready to swallow it. Was it a great snake for a great egg? Or were their sizes paradoxically incompatible, yet still possible according to the laws of eternity? Where there is no space or time, every possibility is a reality, even God himself can be, according to a philosopher whose name escapes me. Max raised his head, expectant. The boy lay face down on the floor, his elbows on the ground and his chin in his hands. And just as the snake's gaping jaws were about to seize the great egg, a croak was heard from the sky. And the immense feathered shadow of a huge owl passed over the snake. It stopped in the position it had assumed, but it could no longer go any further. It snapped its weary jaws back together, hissing endlessly, like unending insults that no man could imagine. But it did not retreat. From that day on,

she kept circling the egg, never moving forward. Only her offended and venomous hiss could be heard, especially each morning, when the new day reminded her of her powerlessness. And in the sky there were other circles, those of the owl that circled and circled in concentric and eccentric motions. When one cycle of approaching the egg ended, another of moving away began, one as vast as the one that had brought it to the egg. Does eternity have a diameter? The ancient Greeks said there was an infinite number that measured an infinite distance. Isn't all that very contradictory, boy? Distance without space or time? Because you can't say that infinity has space or time if it has no limits, since that's what they're for. But numbers don't end, the boy interrupted, and Max jumped at the sound of his voice. I once counted all night, hoping to stay awake to wait for my mom. The doctor laughed again, but the sarcasm softened his raucousness. "You used the method in reverse, very good, lad. So, where were we? Ah yes, the distance the owl traveled was eternal, so anyone would say it would take centuries or millennia to return, giving the snake ample opportunity. And yet, it wasn't so. It went and returned as quickly as if it had never left. But for anyone who glanced at the sky from time to time, above the treetops, one moment it had vanished, and the next it was back. A presence without presence, unlike the snake, which was a presence without absence. The snake's attack alternated chronometrically (if eternity uses a stopwatch, what nonsense am I spouting! But after all, I'm telling a legend) with the owl's attack. One interrupted the other in an exercise that repeated itself again and again, until not even they knew if it had ever begun. They had no memories, driven only by an impulse they didn't analyze as men analyze their minds, as boundless as the meaning of this legend. But if the snake ate the egg, wouldn't the owl eat the snake? The boy's reasoning was as naive as absolute certainty can be. The doctor looked at him suspiciously and remained silent, letting him answer himself. The boy stammered, gesturing nervously, building houses of ideas in the air. Finally, he said, pointing to the forecastle where the three women stood: when that happens, only the owl will remain, but it will have no one to fight. That's true, boy, just one—that is, the number one is an existential inconsistency. God, for example. There are those who explain all the madness of the world solely with the existence of a God who is eternally alone. The boy pondered. And what will become of the owl? It will have no

one to eat and no one to save. That's right, boy, if I were God, I'd kill myself, but even that's something you can't do. You're eternal like nothingness. But in nothingness there's nothing, the boy said, growing more and more confused as his understanding rose, or rather, fell. If God is nothing, then he doesn't exist. Then the doctor stood up, stretched his legs, tired from being curled up, and grabbed one of the boy's hands. The boy hadn't seen when or from where the razor blade came that cut his palm. He screamed and pulled away. Blood fell to the floor, and Max licked it, offering no defense. This is all we are, the doctor said, pointing to the injured hand. Then he took a handkerchief from his pocket and bandaged it. The dog growled now, but not at either of them. Instead, it growled toward the forecastle, from where noises were coming that only the dog could hear. It was, perhaps, Altea, weeping inconsolably for what she had heard, recognizing the ever-expanding vastness of the indiscernible space she inhabited, and the solitude in which she had been imprisoned. For the hissing and croaking to her right and left—if those uncertain places of nothingness could be called such—continued on and on with their endless music. The snake and the owl sat in chairs on either side of the bed. And she was enclosed within walls so fragile they were impossible to break.

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Valverde and Gonçalvez had spent the entire day together, talking, and often silently leaning over the side of the boat, watching the river's swift current and the banks of the Paraná slowly regaining their usual appearance as they traveled upstream. They talked about medicine, no doubt, but also about many places in Brazil they had never visited together, yet each knew very well. Juan Valverde de Amusco was Argentinian, but his parents were Portuguese, having settled in Rio de Janeiro and later in São Paulo, and much later had traveled to Iguazu. When he was born, they had their home and business in Misiones. He explored the ruins as a child and

slept there many nights, listening to the sounds of the surrounding jungle. The animals called to him, the plants seemed to phosphoresce in the star-filled night. He could even hear the thunder of the falls, so far away and yet so near at the same time. He knew his ears were exquisite, and at times they were a curse, because he heard everything said behind his back, whether near or far. That's why he hid, and the Jesuit ruins were his favorite place during his childhood. There, the silence created by God was more of a virtue than the curse so many believers reproached him for: in the silence, Valverde could hear what others couldn't: the sound of the jungle, multifaceted, enigmatic, and revealing. If silence was the voice of God, he found in its crevices the infinite voices of the deity. Unrepeatable, imperishable. Strong and thunderous like the waters that fell many kilometers away, from the heights to the bottom of a wide, deep river. A bestial river that never ran dry because it was fed by the countless calls of birds, by the boundless sounds of insects, by the growls of predators and the cries of their prey, a mixture of ruthlessness and despair. The souls of the animals were in those bodies because that's what they were: incarnate souls that, upon dying, vanished with their bodies. But Valverde had been searching for the souls of men for many years. He searched among the corpses and never found them. He looked toward the trailer with the bodies destined for Corrientes.

Perhaps they would talk about them that afternoon, a week after the meeting in the cabin in Altea, where they were all together for the one and only time.

Perhaps Gonçalvez was asking him about the corpses, because no matter how hard he tried to look away, they drew him in. As if he had to do something with them. It was, surely, the custom his family had instilled in him, and which he had learned even though they hadn't taught him. He had left his parents in São Paulo, his grandparents in Bahia, and many cousins in Minas Gerais. A whole family network dedicated to the same thing: the removal of bodies after last rites. He had heard so many stories of carts going from town to town, from house to house, on the way to the cemetery. Stories of plagues, wars, and massacres. He was so jaded by the time he turned seventeen that, after spending more than a month ill in a hospital, where they found nothing but a melancholy that no one could ever cure, when he felt a little better, he dressed and went out onto the street he had

been looking at from the window of the old hospital in Bahia. The sun and the sand were different from the mud and dampness. There were no worms under the rocks and rotting roots, but there were beetles and scorpions. The sun dried, but the moon moistened. Male and female of a universe he didn't understand, because repetition and circular cycles were as monotonous as life and death over and over again, and so on forever. Arriving at the cemetery was nothing more than restarting the path to the cemetery. A round trip around a perimeter whose shortcut was of an infinite diameter. What was that ancient number? But he remembered more the legend of the owl and the snake.

That night, they both went downstairs to the bathroom. It was their first time there. The grand Napoleonic building still held its secrets. They opened the door and smelled the damp scent. They would surely have turned back, regretting their decision, if they hadn't seen the large porcelain tubs attached to the floor by metal pipes ending in bronze faucets. Oil lamps hung on the ceiling, unlit. Empty shelves lined the walls. They approached and opened the cabinet doors. The old porcelain basins were still there, almost all of them broken.

"Gentlemen," said a voice from the doorway. "If you wish to accompany me, you are welcome."

The captain went inside and started turning on the lights. He lowered them by turning a crank on the wall, and once they were on, he raised them again. Then they saw that the walls were covered in tiles that must retain the heat.

"Impressive," said Valverde.

-I'm glad you like it, gentlemen. Make yourselves at home.

Carla came in, carrying a stack of towels in her arms. She put them on a table and found the men staring at her.

"It has been offered," said the captain.

"I don't doubt it," Valverde said.

There was no need to tell her anything. She turned on the taps, and the sound of the old pipes, so rarely used lately, filled the air. The water was clear but cold. Then she went outside and returned with a bucket of hot water, which she carried effortlessly. Carla was strong, as well as beautiful. She was accommodating, as well as ambitious. That's why the others didn't like her. She had always realized it, and Valverde knew it well.

The tubs were filled, the water at the temperature most to the men's liking. One put in a hand, another a foot, and the doctor, unaccustomed to it, was the last to approve, even though he hadn't even touched the water.
The captain began to undress and got into the tub, resting his arms and head on the edges. His rigid body began to relax, while the water made his body hair look like a tundra. Valverde did the same, but his was a small body, with a torso of well-defined shoulders and almost no hair. Rio, as he got into the water, closed his eyes with a smile. Gonçalvez was the last. He took off his clothes, folded them carefully, and left them on a chair. He looked at the others, who weren't paying attention to him, put his feet in the tub, and stood there, as if getting used to the water temperature. Then he lay down as he had seen the others do.
And they were silent for a long time. Carla had opened the door twice, without entering. The second time, she saw the captain looking at her, and she asked something silently. He shook his head. Everything was fine, he seemed to be saying; he would call her if he needed her. Then he winked at her, and she smiled. His face disappeared as she closed the door.
The captain also had a smile, but he sank into an abyss when he heard Valverde's voice.
-I'm glad to see you calm after many days, Captain.
What was meant as a compliment only served to remind her of the trouble she'd caused by entering that room. She sighed deeply and resigned herself to talking about what she didn't want to, as if her body were a burning nail trying to cool on a block of ice. Or was her heart a cold piece of iron trying to melt in hot water?
He made a gesture of boredom, which was the most satisfactory answer for Valverde, and then asked Gonçalvez, whom he knew liked silence and had to be forced to speak.
Will you stay with us, doctor? We need you…
The doctor suddenly raised his head; perhaps he was falling asleep. He thought for a moment, surely about his family. Responding to his own thoughts, he said:
"I trust they received my obituary. Yes, Captain. I couldn't leave the ship without knowing what will happen to Mrs. Altea. Besides, I believe..."
"Don't give up on saying what we already know, doctor," Valverde said. "You don't think you'll survive many more days."

-That's right, and I'm surprised she's still holding on. But feeding her is difficult, and sooner or later...
"And the child, doctor?" the captain asked.
"So far, I think it's doing well. It's getting nourishment from the amniotic fluid produced by its mother's body, but if she doesn't feed, I don't know which of them will die first. I've seen many cases of prolonged survival in this condition, and they're very sad. Many times, families have asked me for help to end it, but in most cases, they resolve it themselves."
"Are you Catholic, doctor?" Valverde asked.
-I am one by upbringing, but I don't practice it.
- Do you believe in life after death?
"No, Valverde." Suddenly, they saw him become nervous, get up, and sit on the edge of the tub. His tall, thin, and scrawny naked body dripped water onto the floor. He rested his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands, rubbing them together as he spoke.
-But I've noticed something about Mrs. Altea that has caught my attention. The others paid attention. When a man like him began to speak in the way he had, it was important.
-I checked his eyes. The right one, the healthy one, is blind. The left one, which should be nothing more than dead tissue inside the orbit ruptured by the bullet, seems to see.
He could have mentioned that he had seen something similar in Manuel, but he couldn't confess that he had known him before bringing him back dead.
Valverde laughed.
"I'm not lying to you, my friend. I've done several tests. The right eye seems anatomically sound, but it has no pupillary light reflex. I removed the bandages from the left eye. The scar is closing. It's even missing fragments of facial bone, but when I shine a light in front of it, the body reacts. These are called light stimuli that produce motor reflexes."
They were left thinking.
"And does knowing that help, Doctor?" the captain asked. His skepticism was an attempt to mask his anxiety.
"It only tells us that the brain isn't completely dead, although I can't explain it. But sooner or later..." The refrain echoed in the room, and they

even thought they saw it written on the only mirror, which had begun to fog up.
"Captain," Valverde said. "The doctor and I have been talking, and I thought I could help Mrs. Altea."
-You already said it a few days ago in your room, you and that woman, Mara.
"Leave Mara aside; she has a strong personality, and it's best not to mess with her. I speak of other forms of healing. I learned a great deal in Brazil, especially from the old tribal healers and their women, of course. Herbs..."
"Drugs," Mendoza interrupted. "That's how he makes a living..."
"Yes, Captain, but that's business. I'm talking about life and death. I've seen people in tribes who looked dead, but their bodies were still breathing and beating. What was the secret? There are so many that they can't be called secrets, but rather knowledge."
Gonçalvez had stopped and was walking around the room, with his hands behind his back and his head down.
- Are you telling me we have to go all the way to Brazil?
Valverde hesitated, but said:
-That's right, but I don't think she'll hold out.
- So why the hell are you telling me all this?
Mendoza had gotten up, and half the water overflowed onto the floor. He approached Valverde, who was still inside, grabbed him by the arms, furious, and, shaking him, glared at him as if he were going to hit or drown him. Valverde smiled inwardly; he had managed to strike right at the heart of the matter.
"I'm telling you this because I know what I'm doing, Captain. Despite appearances, I'm not a charlatan. If you don't trust me, ask the doctor. He's the ship's physician, the expert and the authority on these matters."
But the seed of doubt had already been planted, and it wasn't uncertainty, but rather a disquiet that would never subside until it reached its climax. He let go of Valverde, who fell backward back into the bathtub, causing the remaining water to overflow. Máximo returned to his own, grumbling, angry, and excited. His body was like that of an angry savage, because he had let his hair grow long since that trip into the interior of the province with Altea, and then his beard after the shooting. He climbed into the almost empty bathtub and shouted:

- Carla! Water! Where are you, you fucking whore!
Valverde looked at him sarcastically, but wasn't about to provoke him again. Gonçalvez was in a corner of the room, probably scared.
Carla appeared with a bucket, followed by a man carrying one on each side. They poured the water into the empty tubs. The man got out and closed the door. Carla stayed, adjusting the temperature of the freshly brought hot water with the tap water. Then she sat on the edge of the captain's tub and began to gently sponge his head. Now there was silence, and the captain had stopped panting. His eyes were closed, and his head was resting on the edge. Carla wet the sponge with warm water and cleaned Máximo's forehead, face, and hair. Then she did the same to his shoulders, and then to his chest and abdomen. She murmured something as she did so. The other two didn't understand, but it was a whisper that sounded like something like, "Relax, Captain, calm down. Carla's here to help you feel better." That was what they imagined, letting their imaginations run wild, stimulated by what they saw: one of Carla's hands underwater, moving slowly up and down, in time with the captain's breathing, his eyes still closed and his forehead uncovered. Then she lifted the skirt of her dress and stepped into the tub. Her body rocked against the captain's. Valverde was smiling, and Gonçalvez had moved closer, his hands on his groin.
Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza was simply a man without past or future, without guilt or fear, whose face smiled because his body smiled. He opened his eyes and gave a knowing look to the other two: to Valverde, whose mockery he had already guessed many days before, and to the doctor, standing there with an erection he couldn't hide no matter how hard he tried.
Valverde stood up and approached them. He caressed Carla's back until he reached her vagina, occupied by Mendoza. He returned the play of his fingers to the anus he had once known. Máximo saw Valverde's naked body, that mixture of tanned skin, slender and well-formed, he saw the smiling face, a blend of naiveté and malice, so rare, so peculiar, like the erect member he was inserting into Carla. He observed her face, pained, but without complaint. She liked all of this, immensely. He had realized it the first time he saw her come aboard, the day of the shipwreck, all wet and tired, but with her lips open, almost virginal, because that was what

they had been decorated for, if that could be called the way women like her modify certain aspects of their bodies to express what they want, which is not always what they feel. What her eyes expressed, her body or hands denied, but sometimes her lips said something else, even though they didn't speak. And Carla's lips now demanded more, and then she saw the doctor approaching timidly, slightly bent over because his erection was so strong he no longer knew what to do with it. Gonçalvez understood Mendoza's gaze, approached him, and standing there, let Carla fill her mouth with that part of his body he couldn't hide.

All three were inside Carla, and she moaned without pain, as few whores had ever been seen to do. Then they got up and changed positions. She knelt before Valverde and the captain, kissed their members, and waited with undisguised eagerness for them to bathe her as she had bathed them with water. When her face was covered, the captain went to where the doctor was waiting, standing and still aroused. He grabbed his penis and thrust it into Carla's vagina, who was still on the floor, like a dog.

There was no need for him to say, “That’s it, my friend, don’t be afraid, we’re among men, my dear, we’ll all tame this mare together.” That was already in the thoughts of the three of them, even, probably, in Carla’s. Valverde and the captain watched, standing there, each with an arm around the other’s shoulders, waiting for Gonçalvez to finish. And they felt better when they saw the doctor bend over her back, take her head in his hand, and collect the semen they had left inside her with the palm of his hand, then smear his penis with that fluid again, and penetrate her once more, until he finally finished. When he did, he got into one of the bathtubs and closed his eyes, his chest heaving. The captain got dressed and patted her chest before leaving. Valverde only put on his trousers, and before leaving, he kissed her and murmured something in her ear, something in Portuguese.

Carla was still on the floor, naked, face down. Tired? Hurt? Satisfied? Gonçalvez, who was now watching her, wouldn't have been able to say. He was content with the fact that she was breathing. He dried himself off, and while he was getting dressed, one of the captain's men came in.

-Sorry, doctor, I came to clean, I thought everyone had already left.

Gonçalvez said nothing, and left buttoning up his shirt.

The man held a bucket of dirty water in his left hand and a broom with a rag dangling from the end in his right. He was neither old nor young, probably between forty and fifty. He'd come up with a friend, but when the foreman, Márquez, had asked him if he had a profession, he'd shrugged. He'd been no good as a machinist or a sailor. After several days, all he knew how to do was clean. He wasn't fat and moved with ease, carrying heavy loads on his back, working hard with his broad shoulders. Now he watched the woman lying face down, her palms flat on the floor, trying to get up. He watched her, without helping, because it was nice to see her ass spread open and her hair covering her face, and her breasts bouncing as she tried to rise. The three men had certainly given it to her hard, and he smiled at the thought. He hadn't had a wife for a long time, and now, seeing that whore completely naked, and with the remains of other men on top of her: her sticky hair, her open ass, her tits covered in bruises, he, who wasn't that old yet, knew that he was getting aroused.

He put down the bucket and broom, pulled down his pants, and penetrated her until he finished. He knew she liked it; her body told him so. Her underwear was soft, and he entered easily, which is why it was so pleasurable for him to finish not once, but twice. Afterward, he pulled up his pants, grabbed his things, and left. He would clean in the morning. At the door, he ran into two sailors who had been watching him. They came in and grabbed Carla.

It was the only time she tried to scream. They covered her mouth, hit her face a couple of times, not very hard, just enough for Carla to understand. They entered her, one at a time and then simultaneously. They left, and others were waiting.

Throughout the night, the rumor spread among the crew, and possibly twenty of the men passed through that room and penetrated Carla. Some kissed her, others hit her, but all left in her what they thought Carla wanted. A memory. Because it's not pleasure that's remembered as much as pain.

At five in the morning, probably because it was already dawn, she was lying on the floor, her body covered in bruises, her hair dirty, and a trail of clotted blood, too large to be just menstrual flow, trickling from her lower abdomen. The last person to have been with her was a fifteen-year-old boy, the son of one of the crew members, who had stayed in his cabin, asleep,

because no one had said anything to him until his father went back to bed. The boy had seen his bloody penis and was frightened. He pulled up his trousers and ran out to find his father. The man woke up and figured everything out.
"I knew those whores would cause trouble," he grumbled, "I told the captain, I told everyone..." He continued grumbling as he dressed and ordered his son to stay and wash thoroughly. The last thing he needed was to catch some disease.
She went to the bathroom. She was shocked by the filth and blood. She moved the body, and that was all it took. She would go find Valverde. He had brought them here, and he had to fix this.
He found him half asleep after knocking on his door twenty times.
- What's wrong, Montes?
"One of his whores is dead," he said.
When he confirmed Carla's death, he told Montes to shut his mouth. He would come up with something.
"Because of the other women, I mean. Between us, old man, we all know. Don't worry, Montes, go with your son. Next time, keep a closer eye on him."
Montes didn't know what face to make. Anger suddenly turned to shame.
Valverde was a sorcerer.
Valverde was a charlatan.
Valverde was always right, because ultimately he knew the only thing that could be done.
When he was alone, he lifted Carla and went outside. He walked through the below-deck corridors. He knew the light wasn't suitable for such situations. Carla's body would vanish as if she had never died. He walked several meters through various corridors, retracing the same steps he had taken in recent days, under the pretext of admiring the great ship. He found the room, narrow but large enough for a bed and numerous shelves along the walls. He had been filling them with instruments he found among the trash thrown into the river from the ship: bottles, metal scraps, nails, screws, rope. He had also found old medications abandoned in a room that no one had apparently seen before, not even during the refit in Buenos Aires. But they were so old they were practically useless, at least for their original purposes. Nevertheless, he had already begun working with them.

In just a few days, his notebook was filled with formulas and combinations. And yet, he knew he was still lacking much equipment. The corpses in the boat would give him money to get what he needed in Corrientes, but now he had the most important thing: the body from which to obtain what he needed most. He hadn't asked for it, but providence had granted it. A body that, nevertheless, was filled with the fluid of men.
He left the corpse on a bed to which he had added and nailed planks to raise it like a hospital gurney. He filled a bucket with water and began to clean it. The bruises would persist until the body decomposed, but he would try to prevent that until it was no longer useful to him. He cut the hair until the head was shaved. For a minute, he looked at and caressed Carla's face. She had been one of his last risks when hiring women. She was too beautiful, too rebellious and provocative, too different from the others. All of that was a risk with a prostitute, and above all, the fact that she liked what she did. She liked men too much, and she hated women too much. He had asked her once. She, in response, had sat on his lap with her legs open.
Perhaps she would find something else in her mind, but now she didn't have time. Dawn had broken, and the women would ask for her. Not because they liked her presence, but like someone looking for a dog that always bites, so as not to be caught off guard.
He covered the body with a sheet and left.

*

Many heard the scream that morning. Some men stopped what they were doing, just for a few seconds, perhaps glancing at each other. The women who were still in bed opened their eyes in fright; others were dressing or looking at themselves in a mirror in the large cabin that might have belonged to a French noblewoman, or to the king's *whore* . Now, as then, it smelled of cosmetics, and dresses lay scattered on the floor, chairs, and beds. They knew where the scream came from, and who had uttered it. Valverde heard it as he left the room where he had left Carla. Gonçalvez

hadn't gone to bed and was checking his briefcase when he heard the scream from the cabin he planned to go to that very morning, and he took his watch from his pocket.

It was six in the morning.

Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza lay awake, his hands behind his head, staring at the beams of his cabin's ceiling, reading the twists and knots of the wood in search of an explanation for what he felt. But not even the ancient kings who left their spirits on that ship seemed to have done what he had done, and if they had, remorse didn't exist then, or hadn't yet been taught to that breed of men who wore wigs in their orgies while listening to a string quartet or a flute and harpsichord duet. And the snuff evaporated into the air above an ocean that ignored the continent's hunger, but knew death because it invoked it every day with its storms and the resulting desolation of shipwrecks. Wigs floated on the water like remnants of a civilization that had ended in revolt and would soon begin again. He heard the scream, as if someone had been killed again. Why did he think that? It was said that the second time is more painful than the first, because it is expected and deserved. And he lay there, waiting.

The grandfather clock in the office chimed at the usual time, but no one was there except Max, who had grown accustomed to sleeping under the old desk. The animal raised its head, first at the shout, then at the chime of the bell. The two sounds blended together, and Max, equally confused, thought he heard the voice of one of his old owners, the one who had been with the woman he'd met on the riverbank. She was now in bed, motionless, and no longer spoke to him or stroked him. The man had vanished, and he remembered almost nothing more about him than that tone of voice, which sounded so familiar today that he had to get up and run toward where it was coming from. When he reached the room, he saw a man being embraced by a woman, who was rocking him. But the man, whom he didn't recognize, was crying and moaning, and the woman was murmuring comforting words.

José sat on the bed. He had put on his underwear, ready to walk after a long time. He felt good and strong. While he was getting dressed, Mara had watched him from a chair, smiling, but he realized her gaze was lost in a void. He, however, couldn't ignore his own joy. He felt no resentment toward Mara or the women who had beaten him. He had been strong, and

for a moment he thought he was going to die. He remembered little of that night, and he rubbed his head with his shaved hair. Valverde had stitched up several wounds, and he could still feel the scars and the bumps on his bones.
"And what about the good Dr. Valverde?" he asked sarcastically.
"He's around here somewhere," Mara said. "But we have a real doctor on the ship. He came to see you many times..."
-I think I remember, it was after the shipwreck...I think. I get the days mixed up.... I dreamed of a very large bird that pulled me out of the water and lifted me into the air.
-Oh, really?
- And with chains. Birds and chains, it seems absurd, even if it's a dream.
- And any memories of the shipwreck?
-The blows and the drowning, but no...those were your blows...
He laughed, scratching his bare chest, touching the muscles in his arm. The bruises were gone, and his broken ribs had healed. He took a deep breath and frowned.
- Did you save me, Mara?
She smiled, approached the bed, and sat down.
-I have to tell you something, José.
"What?" he said, and his gaze darkened when he saw Mara's eyes. Her pupils seemed to flicker, but it wasn't quite that; there was something different. Two birds fluttering in the black sky of those eyes?
-This is the ship your brother and his wife boarded.
José knew about the ship, but it had been so long ago, he thought, that he'd almost forgotten he was now on a ship very similar to the one he'd longed to find. Finally, he told himself, he would see Manuel again. He smiled, and for the first time his face was free of all sarcasm and ulterior motives. José's face, Mara told herself, was that of a teenager reunited with someone he'd missed terribly.
"Manuel is dead..." she said.
José stared at her. He understood. He accepted. Both the words and the reality. Suddenly, his strong shoulders covered in brown hair slowly slumped, his back hunched, his head seemed to be overcome by the weight of something as uncertain as a thought, elusive in its ethereal nature. But the words gave him weight, and that weight was an anchor tied to his

heart. And the heart is a muscle that tears, and it cannot beat peacefully if its fibers are broken.
He crossed his arms over his chest and began to weep. Mara embraced him. With her missing arm, she pressed against his back, with the other she caressed his scars. She rocked him like a baby, and she startled when José let out the cry that echoed throughout almost the entire boat. A cry that was both a wail and a tearing apart, a lament that could not be consoled because it was the death and birth of a pain. Mara knew that pain never dies, it simply hides. How long it lasted, she couldn't have said. She felt it throughout her body because his head was resting on her chest, his mouth open, emitting that furious cry almost between her breasts. So many nights she had felt that man's lips in that same position, but the cries were different, and the pain was distinct. Now something else bound them: the same thing she had felt growing between them, the same thing that had caused her boat to capsize and exposed everyone to death, except for the two of them: Mara and José. And they had already found his son, who would be theirs.
But Joseph cried out and lamented for his brother. Didn't he hate him because he desired his wife? Or had he raped Altea because she had stolen his brother?
Both things, perhaps, were real, but never simultaneous. There are feelings that cannot coexist in the same soul. Love for two different objects is incompatible with the size of the soul: one loves one and hates the other. But which was which?
It didn't matter anymore. Manuel was dead. Altea would soon be too. Mara was now Joseph's wife and the mother of his son.
(*dear Elsa, little Elsa*)
-There, calm down, my love. I will comfort you, I will always be here...to caress you, to hug you.
Mara's voice was sweet, and her words had the scent of a lullaby. Her dress was wet with tears and saliva. José was a boy who lamented endlessly. When was the last time he had cried? Had he ever cried? José Menéndez Iribarne was a merchant seaman. A man like that doesn't cry for no reason. There must be a compelling reason. The death of a brother, for example, especially if it's his only brother.

Mara looked up. The dog was watching them from the doorway. Max gave a soft bark and came closer. He sniffed José, wagged his tail, but suddenly stopped. He recognized something about the man, not the smell, but something else. He stood up, placing his front paws on the man's knees, and licked his face. Mara laughed and stroked his head, but the dog jumped and growled at her.

"You fucking dog," she said, unable to help herself.

José stepped away from Mara and dried his eyes. He looked at the dog and stroked its back several times. Max seemed happy.

"It's Manuel's dog, it has to be... some fishermen told me that he and Altea were waiting on the beach with a dog that had joined them. That's why he recognizes me..."

Mara didn't like to share her man with anyone, not even a dog. Nevertheless, she kept quiet. Smiling, she stroked José. She would wait as long as necessary, she would comfort him until the end of his life. But he got up, put on a shirt, and asked:

- Where is your wife?

-She's in her cabin, she's very sick, I think she's going to die.

-Take me.

They left together, and Max followed them. It was almost seven in the morning. Carmen was also on her way to Altea's cabin. She was surprised to see José. The women talked.

"Carla didn't sleep with us last night," she told Mara.

-She must have been with someone, we'll see her at noon...

-I already asked, Mara, nobody saw her.

- And what did you expect them to say?

Valverde was sitting in a chair by the door.

"As a security guard?" Mara asked.

The doctor is inside. Good morning, José, it's good to see you.

"Yes, yes," he replied. He was eager to see Altea.

They waited a while, not out of concern for Gonçalvez, but to avoid Natacha's disapproving gaze.

"Did you see Carla?" Carmen asked Valverde.

-I saw her, and for the last time...

He laughed at the way women looked at him.

"What did they expect? This isn't the place for her. Last night they tied up a boat and a guy got on board. He was an old friend of Carla's; I recognized him because he was the one who supported her before she came to live with us. They got into a fight for a while, but then they left together in the boat. I don't think we'll ever see her again."
"And you didn't do anything?" Mara asked.
"Did you want her to stay? I don't think you wanted her very much..."
"We're better off without her," Carmen said.
They wouldn't miss her. Prostitutes don't usually want those who like sex for sex's sake. If they liked a man, that was fine, and if he paid them, even better. But sex with just anyone, and without the right price, they didn't understand. Money wasn't compensation, but simply the price of the sale. Don't you go to the theater to see a performance? And isn't it worth more if it's a good performance?
José knocked on the door and, without waiting, went in. He saw Altea on the bed. She was a shadow of her former self compared to his memory. Half her head was covered in bandages, and the sheet covered her body, revealing only a small lump at her abdomen. A woman with dark hair and a dark dress sat at one side of the bed, looking at him with disgust. A tall, thin doctor sat on the other side, examining Altea.
"We apologize, Natacha. But José hasn't been patient. And I've told him everything about Manuel."
Natacha said nothing and waited for the doctor to finish. Gonçalvez took off his stethoscope.
-I'm glad to see you recovered.
- You're the one who took care of me these past few days, aren't you? I appreciate it, but I'm not in the mood for compliments right now.
He looked nervous and irritated, and sat down on the bed. He observed Altea's face, which was gaunt and pale.
- What happened to them both? I don't understand.
He noticed that everyone was looking at each other, but he sensed that the cause of those looks was completely independent of each other.
“Your brother was shot,” Gonçalvez said. Today he didn’t have that apologetic, or fearful, look he always wore. “They brought him to my house, wounded, back in Entre Ríos. He must have been robbed. But there was nothing they could do. They buried him in a local cemetery.”

- Her too?
"What happened in Altea was an accident," Natacha said. "My husband, Captain Mendoza, accidentally fired a shot."
"That's right, Iribarne, we were all drunk that night, and a shot went off accidentally. It's my fault, sir."
Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza had entered almost unnoticed by anyone except Max. José stood up and extended his hand.
-I am Captain José Menéndez Iribarne, a merchant marine.
Maximo hadn't expected that. He shook his hand.
- What did the authorities say about my brother, I mean?
"What authorities?" Mara said mockingly, joining in the charade he had started. The charade was like a spider, slowly and surely weaving its web.
"The village priest, the owner of the general store, or the doctor? In those towns, the doctor is the only authority."
- What if my sister-in-law had died while pregnant?
The captain's boots clicked on the floorboards, as if he had snapped to attention. Natasha was smiling.
"I am at your disposal for any favor you may request," Mendoza said.
-I won't ask for any, Captain, if the child is born.
The framework was already built.
- What do you think, doctor?
Gonçalvez glanced at Valverde, who was watching everything from the doorway. He was trapped too.
-I am confident that, with the necessary care, the lady will survive to give birth.
"I hope so, doctor. I have all my hopes in that child. My brother was everything to me... you'll understand, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for this orphan."
José's voice was soft, yet firm. He said nothing more than what everyone expected, and precisely for that reason, the sentence he pronounced was all the more resounding.

From then on, José and Natacha were the ones who cared for Altea almost constantly. In the morning, Carmen would come to bathe and change her, then the doctor would come, even if there was no change in her condition. But Gonçalvez meticulously recorded every sign of Altea's condition in his

papers: changes in skin color, moisture, perspiration, the healing of her scars, her response to sensory stimuli, the amount of urine or stool. After more than an hour, he would leave with his briefcase under his arm, rubbing his eyes. Many saw him meet with Valverde after midday in the cramped room he had occupied not long before, or sometimes walking on deck.

José and Natacha took turns feeding him.

"You go and rest, ma'am," he told her one day. "You've done so much for her, leave it to me now. After all, she's my sister-in-law, and the only thing I have left of my brother."

Then she fed her, speaking to her, and saw Altea's eyelids move. Putting the spoon down on the plate, she lifted one of her eyelids and examined her right eye. It was blind. She snapped her fingers in front of her, and the left eyelid, now a shapeless mass of scarred skin, moved. She tried to lift it, separating the adhesions the doctor had advised against removing because they were healing. She saw a dark hollow whose depth seemed greater than expected.

He spoke to her, and the sound of his voice, perhaps entering through that opening, triggered a reflex in Altea's right arm. Just a barely perceptible spasm, made more evident by the movement of her fingers.

He recognizes me and still remembers, of course, my voice. How could he forget my body, since it's the same one he's creating ?

But she couldn't continue. Natacha came in and sat down in her usual rocking chair on the other side of the bed.

- Ate?

"Yes, and I think he recognizes my voice too. His good eyelid moves when I speak to him." "He obviously told her about the finger movement." Natacha underestimated the comment.

"I noticed that almost from the first week." Then he stood up to look closely at Altea's face, and ran his hand over her forehead.

She's drenched in sweat, that's new. But it's not hot in here. I wonder if she has a fever.

She found a mercury thermometer she kept in a drawer and placed it under Altea's armpit. She sat back down, rigid, her gaze fixed on the sick woman, ignoring José, but feeling his stare upon her. Then she checked the temperature.

-It's normal.
-Maybe it was that soup.
"But don't tell me that stupid thing about giving it to her while it was hot. It could have burned her; her skin and mucous membranes are very delicate in that state."
Natacha looked at him with disdain. José didn't answer; let her think what she wanted.
Then they were silent for a long time. She closed her eyes, but he knew she remained vigilant.
"Did you know Manuel?" he asked.
Natacha answered without opening her eyes:
-I met him.
-He was a great man…
She waited, and then said:
-It depends on the point of view.
- What do you mean?
-That there are things we don't yet know about our closest relatives.
José looked at her intently, his eyebrows furrowed and his hands on his knees.
- And you knew him better than I did, ma'am?
Natacha swayed almost innocently, but her smile was beginning to be, more than ruthless, satisfied.
- Do you know that I have a son?
She doesn't want to answer, or she beats around the bush, she's one of those. So different from Mara…
-I didn't know, and where is the boy? I haven't seen him.
- Are you sure? Look closely, he's right next to you, and he's resting his good hand on one of your shoulders, sir.
José saw that she was looking into an empty space, and that look was so confident that he gave an involuntary start and moved his shoulder.
-I don't know what you're talking about, there's nobody here.
He saw her speaking in murmurs, turning her head as if following someone's movements in the room. He thought he understood.
- And what happened to him?
-He killed himself.
- And what does all that have to do with Manuel?

-You should ask him.
- To your son?
Natacha made a gesture of exasperation, rubbing her hands together.
"Do you know everyone in the city you live in, and expect them to know each other in this place? I say you should ask your own brother, sir, if you want to find out."
- She's crazy!
He got up, angry, but stopped when he heard someone talking. He looked around. Natacha was watching Altea, but didn't seem to notice anything unusual. He, however, saw Altea's lips moving, and the voice was impersonal, or more like a man's, really. He sat up in bed and put his ear to her lips. He couldn't understand the words. He didn't know whether to be glad about this sign of recovery or not, and he wondered why Natacha wasn't saying anything.
Then he realized that they were not words, but a sound that tried to imitate a syncopated and monotonous rhythm, like that of drums.

Tum, tum, tam, tum, tum, tam

Like those from that night of the rituals in the village, while he and Altea were in the hut. Pressing one hand against Altea's mouth and his whole body against hers. Her legs raised and her arms trying to push him away. And his legs straining to keep her against the wall. *Thump, thump, thump* , and so on for hours, until it faded away with the arrival of morning.
Where was the voice coming from? It wasn't from the lips, but they were moving. Not from Altea's throat, because it was a man's voice.
José got up and sat back down in his chair, covering his face with his hands. He felt the shadow of night approaching through the door. He heard Natacha's footsteps as she said:
-It's already night. I'll go get dinner.
He heard the door open and not close again. And he felt a fear he hadn't felt in a long time, the fear of open doors. Like in Cádiz, when he and Manuel would talk in a room for hours, and he would hear his father's watchful footsteps in the hallway, and his mother's protective footsteps following behind. Fear forced them to turn off the lights, but if his father found the door closed, he would fly into a rage. Opening it and turning on the lights was to reveal that fear that hid like a fold of shadow in the dark corners of the room, in the ceilings. And that then descended upon their

beds when his father left, leaving the door open. He never locked it, he had never taken it off its hinges. The threat was always more effective than practical mechanisms. Old Menéndez Iribarne's voice was crueler than an open door revealing the room's entrails wrapped in damp sheets. And they would both share, until dawn, the impressions of what they saw in the shapes of the room—perhaps dreams, or whatever they truly were. The shapes of things: the bed, the wardrobe, the mirror, the chairs, the hangers, the chandelier, the bedside lamps, the patterns on the wallpaper and rugs, the porcelain vases, and even the urinal hidden under the bed. All of it took on strange contours as time passed and they grew older. The nude pictures that friends had given them or sold them, the bodies of men and women they had spied on through the windows of the slums. And so many times they fell asleep mistreating their own bodies as if getting rid of them were the purpose of all life. And then, exhausted, they would fall asleep.

But the light from the corridor cast a somber glow over the corners, and the light was a sound that materialized into a ruminating, a crunching, a purring, a barking, and then into an indeterminate, very low, almost guttural cry. And when each one, finally turning his back on the others, looked toward the walls and the ceiling, he contemplated the definitive shapes that made up those faces: those of rats with large ears and short legs.

Much later, those rooms had transformed into jungles surrounded by rivers, with mud floors and rainy skies. But the faces of the strange rats still appeared from behind tree branches, at the bottom of waterholes, or under a rock they tripped over. But now they had wings, and their flapping was always nocturnal. And twilight became a threat that was self-satisfied: a threat that stirred fear, and it was then that they truly arrived.

The black creatures that, as now, were beginning to flood the room.

José hadn't seen Natacha leave the cabin, nor had he seen her glance back as if someone were following her, deliberately leaving the door open. Had he seen her, he would have even gone to the trouble of opening it so far as to place a chair against it to prevent it from slamming shut in the wind. The wind was stirred by the flapping of bats that flew in and circled Altea's bed and José's chair. Flapping of membranous wings with a sound similar to that of drums.

The *tum, tum* and the *clap, clap* .
Creating the music of memory.
And when the bats settled on Altea's body, José desperately tried to scare them away from her and from himself. He saw their faces and their grimaces, he heard the indeterminate scream they emitted. They bit him, they scratched him. He saw blood on his hands and on Altea's face. He threw himself onto the bed to protect her. Was it like that night of the rituals? Was he protecting her at the same time as he was raping her? Wasn't he protecting Manuel from the neighborhood boys and the school kids? Wasn't hugging them, perhaps, protecting them? And wasn't loving them, then, hurting them?
He protected Altea's body for the rest of the time it took the bats to leave the room. The men arrived to scare them away, as best they could; they were used to it by now. When they entered, José was standing over Altea's body, barely touching her, keeping the womb where the boy grew, trapped in that paradise surrounded by rubble.

WHAT DO BATS SEE?

10

They were already facing Corrientes.
The wide beaches, the clear sky, and the vastness of the jungles that had given way to the city's growth. Houses alternated with short piers that jutted out into the river and seemed about to break with each flood. But they held, though they weren't built to receive ships like the "Juan Manuel." They stopped after having halted their engines half an hour earlier, and even then they had to drop anchor before they overran the docks. From the shore, people had stopped to watch them.
Mendoza was leaning on the railing, using binoculars to help him see and look for the port chief to whom he had sent telegrams.
"Marquez," he said to the old man beside him. "Prepare the boats."
The engineer had everything ready half an hour later. The boats were lowered with men and merchandise: bundles of hides and wool, countless boxes of canned goods, boxes of cigars and pipes, bags of tobacco, bags of yerba mate, furniture from Buenos Aires. Everything was useful for recovering time and money. He watched the boats slowly and safely cross the distance to the docks. The men were talking and seemed happy. The April sun was warm even at those latitudes. The only nuisance was the mosquitoes that attacked at midday, when there wasn't even a hint of rain. The dead bats had been collected and the deck meticulously washed, but the smell of blood always lingered.
Then he looked back, toward the stern, where the boat lay with the corpses covered in lime and a leather tarpaulin that was meant to protect them from insects, but which was now useless. Valverde had gotten away with it; he had dragged them all the way to Corrientes. And now Maximiliano Hurtado de Mendoza saw himself not as a captain adorned with the prestige of his past, but as a mere river captain transporting contraband. And he saw the boat descend a few meters from where he stood, with Valverde and Gonçalvez aboard, until it touched the water and they rowed toward the boat of the dead. From the shore, people gathered close to the water's edge. He didn't need binoculars to see the expressions on their faces: mockery, contempt, but above all, an insatiable curiosity. He had already been told that it wasn't the first time Valverde had made this trip, nor that his cargo was the same as always: dead bodies, prostitutes, and drugs. The groups on the shore, moving further along the flimsy docks,

were made up of young women, perhaps wanting to ask Valverde for work, and men who might have come to buy drugs from him. But a group dressed in white pushed their way through the others and waited.
Valverde untied the rope that connected the boat to the ship and tied it again. The two began to row with great effort. Neither had wanted to go down to help them, even though Valverde had offered them money. Mendoza had forbidden it: if they helped Valverde, they would never again board the “Juan Manuel.” Many considered it and decided against it.
The boat slowly approached the shore. It took them more than half an hour, because the dead were heavy, and their appearance, surrounded by a nauseating smell and thousands of buzzing flies, attracted no one's help. He observed Valverde's face through binoculars, flushed and surrounded by mosquitoes, and enjoyed the small revenge of seeing him suffer, but he knew that all this was merely circumstance for Valverde, a simple half hour after which he would obtain what he desired. Gonçalvez, however, looked like a moving corpse, pale, with no sweat on his overgrown beard, only blackness in his eyes, seeming to drift away, and looking north as one looks toward the border of a war.
The prostitutes who were to be sold in Corrientes had disembarked in another boat rowed by two of his men. Only Mara and Carmen remained to care for Altea. The women laughed at Valverde as they passed very close, covering their noses. He gave them a familiar gesture: a mockery and a reprimand. He always knew how to keep them bound to his will; he needed them, but they didn't know for sure to what extent, and that's why they allowed themselves to love and hate him at the same time, to despise him and then desire him. He had the money and the strange charm, the power to lead and advise them. He had saved their lives many times, as in the flood, and the injuries were nothing more than a fortuitous circumstance, like the flood itself. Just as the designs of God cannot be contradicted or countered, Valverde's designs were unappealable. Hadn't they seen him heal many with his concoctions? Hadn't they been told that he prolonged life? And how many times had they heard in the villages, at night, in the rooms of brothels, that he had brought a dead man back to life?
-Nice day, captain.
Mendoza jumped. Mara was beside him, leaning on the railing like him, watching the boats arriving at the docks.

-You always show up unexpectedly...
Mara laughed.
-I'm sorry for the scare, Captain, it wasn't my intention...
Mendoza doubted it, but said:
-I thought he would get out with his friend.
-I already know Corrientes and this whole border region from when I worked with the other guy, the one I came here with from Spain. Besides, Valverde has his businesses and I have mine.
- And what are yours?
-Now I'll accompany my man.
-That doesn't attract money, I suppose...
"Don't worry, Captain, Valverde has been tasked with negotiating on my behalf with the people from Corrientes. He'll bring us money, and other things."
How anxious Mendoza felt to make them all abandon ship, even Natacha, and remain alone, master of the past, anchored in an endless space of time, a boundless pause. If time is infinite, as he had often read, then the pause had no reason to exist. But doesn't nature die, or does it simply move on? Is each man's life like a second in time? Wouldn't it be more logical that if bodies die, then space and time coordinate their assembly? Either everything is eternal or everything dies definitively. I am a second-rate philosopher, a frustrated teacher, an obsessive vagabond, an irredeemable murderer, he told himself. I don't forgive myself, but I justify myself, I lament, and yet I demand of others what I cannot fulfill. If I were alone with two or three men who also didn't care about the solitude of time. The river is a continuous, meaningless flow, but the sea is the fullness of time. The waves mark the arrhythmia of untimely seconds, the river is a continuous surrender of the heart. It's always the same, but the sea is different because it lies. The river is true and makes itself hated for it, makes itself repulsive to cowards. The sea deceives like a woman. The sea is a mother who, from so much caressing, one day strikes, and does so definitively. The river forgives, the river slips into consciousness and imprisons us in time. The sea shakes us, casts us out and receives us, it changes perpetually. We Hurtado de Mendoza were always sea captains. Only I, the last of my line, let myself be entangled by this long serpent of water.

*

Juan Valverde de Amusco was now, like his ancestor of whom he so often boasted, an anatomist who had no qualms about collecting corpses from the boat moored at the dock. He had taken off his shirt; his body was covered in mosquito bites, and from time to time he scratched himself with a hint of desperation that he tried hard to hide, though he didn't always succeed. Estanislao Gonçalvez assisted him, dragging the bodies to the beginning of the dock, where the hospital employees loaded them onto the cart.

In that operation, several bodies fell into the river, but no one was going to retrieve them. There were more than enough victims of the flood for Valverde to get a hefty cut of state funds this time. Because at the hospital, even though it was forbidden, everyone profited from the trade. The doctors had bodies to study, and what they didn't need was sold to the Indians or the poor. No one was going to say it, of course, but everyone knew that when the meat ran out, as in the last war, something had to be eaten. Meat was plentiful, and it didn't have names. Meat could be cooked, and all illnesses disappeared. That's what those who went from one town to another said.

Many others were dismembered as they were loaded onto the cart, and Valverde watched with sorrow and resignation the way the men hauled the corpses. Despite being used to it, their work still disgusted them. Or perhaps it was simply apathy. Yes, that was it. The complete indifference of life toward what no longer lives. But they didn't know what remained in those remains: bones surrounded by a substance whose decomposition was the seed of future life. Different, of course, but no one could say for sure that the life of a worm wasn't as important as that of a man. They can survive the poisons that kill men; they have persisted for centuries. The

very mosquitoes that had been devouring him were stronger than he, but they had spared him, and that was why he had suffered patiently.
Patience was what most of the men who dealt with the dead lacked. Haste is a matter of time, and time is life's sentence. If only I could hear the conversations of the dead, Valverde often told himself. But we are all clinging to life because we confuse it with consciousness. Don't we live while we sleep? Consciousness guarantees nothing more than fiction: the curtain always raised and everything dark behind the scenes.
There were only a few bodies left in the boat. The last one was dragged out to wait for the cart that was due to return from its fourth round trip to the hospital. It was past noon. Valverde stood at the end of the dock, hands on his hips, his gaze fixed on the agitated doctor.
- Are you hungry, doctor?
The doctor had sat down to rest, several meters away from him.
-Hunger, thirst and tiredness.
Valverde put his shirt back on and sat down to keep him company.
"When we get to the hospital we can clean up, eat, and rest. What are you thinking about? You look distressed."
Gonçalvez was once again surprised by Valverde's convoluted language.
"I still don't understand how he managed to keep those bodies. By now they should be so rotten they'd fall apart in your hands, if anyone could even stand the smell."
“I learned many things from the Indians, Doctor. I’m speaking of Brazil, but they’ve been receiving lessons for generations, for thousands of years. I’m not going to talk to you about geological eras, of course; you’re a man of science, and you know what connects us to Africa. I’ve spoken with explorers, Doctor, and they have fewer prejudices than a village priest when talking to me. There are no recipes, Doctor, you know that better than anyone, because formulas are mere coincidences. Chance, if you want to call it that, governs the world, and chaos is the only god that should be worshipped. But no one is willing to do so, do you know why? It’s too uncomfortable to worship what is everywhere and cannot be seen, but above all, it’s uncomfortable to sublimate ourselves to what is within us. The soul is a chaos that we don’t want to acknowledge, because we would succumb to unreason. And who says that unreason doesn’t have its own logic? Not the rules of the formulas we’re used to.” The human mind is a

hodgepodge, perpetually trying to fulfill the obvious. We rack our brains and go mad, and we keep trying to cram that madness into four walls. And while nothing fits, we keep trying. And that's the reason we praise so much? The one that's supposed to keep us standing on this earth? Isn't that, in fact, putting our remains in a long box? It has four walls, doctor, and a floor and a ceiling, because they even take that away from us: the possibility of heaven or hell.

The doctor got up when the cart arrived. He lifted the remaining body onto the driver's seat without help. The driver waited for Valverde, who climbed in at the back with the corpse. They resumed their journey to the hospital.

- But aren't you going to tell me how you support them?

"There are many methods and various substances. I have a whole catalog in my head, and a good visual memory. I know the plants and powders I've seen, and the names I've read. A lot of Latin, Doctor, and I'm proud of it, make no mistake. The Indians we've worked so hard to kill could have killed us sooner, but what we mistake for weakness they call survival. Do you find a contradiction in that? The contradiction is the soul. Are you one of those who think the soul separates from the body at death?"

-If the soul exists, then yes.

- Why, doctor? If the soul needs a body to manifest itself, it also dies when it doesn't have a body, just as our brain dies when the heart stops.

- Do you mean that the soul has a bodily compartment?

Valverde laughed heartily, and his laughter echoed through the cobblestone streets leading to the hospital. They were no more than three blocks away, but the cart moved slowly because the horse was old and limped. Soon it would end up at the slaughterhouse. Some curious boys followed, and a few dogs sniffed around. Flies buzzed everywhere, but no one bothered to shoo them away.

It was already three in the afternoon, and the silence of the provincial siesta was disturbed by the clatter of the wheels, which, like the rest of the cart and the horse, would soon succumb to the ravages of time, as had the corpse they carried. The improbable thing, as if verisimilitude had anything to do with the drama of the world, was the contrast of that scene with the landscape. The wide river formed a vibrant and shimmering backdrop with its silver and gold reflections under the dull autumn sun; the houses and buildings with garish curtains everywhere; the gray cobblestones of the

streets and the dust rising from the rest; the tall trees or those with leafy canopies along the river or on the sidewalks, intensely green and in bloom. There was still no sign of the impending winter. Summer resisted leaving, slowly moving away, leaving its warm belongings to be transported in several trips. Like the cart and its corpses? There was clearly a dark humor in that similarity, which defied plausibility but constituted the purest substance that amalgamated the facts and things. That was surely what Gonçalvez was thinking when, now silent, he contemplated the clear sky, lying face up in the cart, like the dead man beside him, but breathing and rotating his thumbs one over the other, his hands clasped on his chest, and a most peculiar smile on his face.
The laughter had stopped, but before falling silent, she had answered the doctor's last question:
"That's right, my friend. Now I see he'll be my perfect partner in the task we've set for ourselves. That boy is going to be born, I assure you. And we'll make sure the mother lives long enough for that."

The hospital was large and old. A facade that had once been white was covered in ivy and moss. The windows had old colonial grilles, and ash fell from the roof tiles, because something was being burned in the back park—perhaps branches, perhaps corpses.
"It seems they have too many," said Gonçalvez. "Will they pay you well?"
-Don't worry, I know the director.
At that moment, a tall man with a dark beard and graying, curly hair came out into the hallway. He must have been about forty-five years old. His height blocked the light that came in from the window at the end of the hallway. The walls were whitewashed, with some sections unplastered. Lights hung from the ceiling, and the doors along the wide hallway led not to rooms, but to offices. The open doors revealed desks and bookcases, filing cabinets, and disassembled medical carts. They had almost reached the end of the hallway when they saw a storage room on the right, filled with broken beds, mattresses, stretchers, and operating room equipment. It was from this storage room that Dr. Cisneros appeared.
Valverde and he shook hands, and he introduced Gonçalvez.
"Don't we know each other from somewhere?" he asked his colleague.
-I don't believe it.

Cisneros placed a hand on his forehead and closed his eyes.
-Let me think, I know you, doctor....
He snapped his fingers and said:
- I remember now! We met at university; you were already an eminent figure back then.
He seemed happy and amazed to find him again.
"Just imagine, Valverde, this friend knew every inch of the human body better than Testut. We called him for everything, we even looked for him in the amphitheater during anatomy lessons so he wouldn't pass on the answers. Sometimes he wrote them down, other times he dictated them by moving his lips."
Gonçalvez smiled, but he looked embarrassed. And even more so when the other man said:
- And what is she doing accompanying this scoundrel Valverde?
The three laughed, but Gonçalvez didn't know how to reply. He was no longer an eminent figure, just a poor village doctor who buried more people than he saved.
"He helps me with my experiments," Valverde said.
- Frankenstein's assistant, then?
"Something like that." Valverde patted Gonçalvez on the back, encouraging him. "We got him out of the village where he was, and maybe he'll go back to his family in Minas Gerais."
-Yes, I remember you were from there, with an important, wealthy family, I mean. We still keep in touch with them sometimes, through work, I mean... Especially with the rains we had this summer, all kinds of plagues, cholera, dengue fever, pneumonia, many children died.
- Shall we do business, Doctor? They're waiting for us on the ship to set sail again; the captain wants to make up some time.
-Yes, I've already seen the behemoth they sail on.
The three of them walked to a staircase with enormous, worn tiles, many broken, and the pattern they were supposed to form was incomplete. They reached the first floor and entered the director's office. "Alberto Cisneros, neurologist and neurosurgeon." On one wall was a photograph from the graduation ceremony, and he remembered Cisneros as one of those classmates who always got the upper hand. They hardly ever studied, but they got better grades than everyone else because they knew how to charm

with their personality. They had charisma and wealthy families; they had comforts and the advantages that the others lacked. The others, like Gonçalvez, might or might not have money, but they studied out of vocation or ambition, not out of the inertia of men like Cisneros.
"I remember now, Doctor," he said as he sat down at the desk. "I thought you were going to specialize in anesthesiology."
Cisneros celebrated the comment with a broad smile and sweeping gestures of his arms. He liked to gesture constantly.
"That's right, my friend, but several of them died, and it occurred to me to change specialties. Anyway, as you know, I haven't abandoned the study of the nervous system, so now I don't kill anyone, and at most I keep these poor people in less pain than usual."
- How is that?
“Cisneros is collaborating with me,” Valverde interjected. “Although it might not seem like it, he knows a lot about neurology, and many of his patients are native speakers. I help him interpret the language, and they serve as his guinea pigs. Do you understand?”
Cisneros looked at Valverde seriously, as if asking if the other could be trusted.
"Speak freely, Alberto, Gonçalvez is one of us. Look, my friend, Cisneros provides me with the materials I need, which can only be obtained in a hospital, or by being a doctor, of course. Drugs, my dear, that's what we're talking about, but not only the ones we already know, but also drugs that are being tested, or that not even the government or anyone else knows exist. People get better, often; people live better, sometimes; and on rare occasions, they survive for a long time."
"We conduct research on the reactions of the central nervous system. You already know how meticulously we maintain anatomical specimens of the brain and spinal cord. We need hundreds to get any benefit from ten, or fewer. But we obtained good results. They're not for publication in a scientific journal, of course. But you and I, Doctor, know what medicine is all about, and especially what we call academicism. Hypocrisy is another name for science."
"And politics is the mother of them all..." said Valverde.
They fell silent. On the walls were reproductions of Rembrandt paintings interspersed with diplomas and photographs. Cisneros appeared in his lab

coat in almost every photograph, some in hospital rooms with other doctors, or sitting on a bed next to a dying patient, others in the street, embracing an old woman who was giving him empanadas. There were many science and literature books behind the armchair where he sat, in a large mahogany bookcase, perhaps imported from Europe, as was the dusty armchair against another wall.

Cisneros opened the desk drawer with a key he had taken from his vest. He took out a box of cigars, but inside it were banknotes. He handed them to Valverde, who counted them and put them in his jacket pocket. All of this happened in complete silence, because from the hallway one could hear the continuous footsteps of the nurses and doctors, the squeaking wheels of the gurneys, and the rolling of the oxygen cylinders.

Suddenly, a short, stocky nurse knocked on the open door.

-Come in, Pérez.

This Pérez fellow was carrying a large bag which he left on the floor next to Valverde's chair, and another small one which he placed on the desk.

-That's the most I can give you for this semester, buddy.

Valverde made a gesture as if to take Cisneros' generosity for granted.

- Do you have any particular job in mind?

-Something very important, yes. I wish I could tell you in detail, but I'll explain it in a letter when we're finished, probably from Brazil.

- Do you need assistants? Here, Pérez is an advanced nursing student, and perhaps he could be of use to you.

"We're not in a position to do that, Alberto. There are people involved who wouldn't welcome any more strangers, I mean people outside their circle of acquaintances. Don't worry, I'll keep you updated when it's all over."

"And I hope the sick woman recovers," Cisneros said, rising and shaking their hands. "I've heard news of what's happening on that ship; it's impossible to travel on that behemoth without being surrounded by a cabal of unexpected spokespeople."

Valverde and Gonçalvez went out and down the stairs. One carried the small bag, delicate and silent except, perhaps, for the occasional clinking of glass; the other carried the large one, whose contents sounded continuously like clanging metal.

"Are you annoying, Estanislao?" Valverde asked.

-That's right, Juan- And now that I remember, weren't they going to give us food and a bathroom?
The other man shrugged; he was tired too. However, he was only carrying the light bag slung over one shoulder like a messenger bag, and as he moved, it gave off a scent of spices, or perhaps the smell of an old pharmacy.
-They're too busy, you can see that.
The corridor they were now exiting through was crowded with people waiting to be seen. Some children were crying, others were crawling along the corridor. There were old people with bent backs, and women who were moaning, and others who were talking with their arms crossed, as if angry, as they watched them pass by.
"Those women know me," Valverde said. "I've pulled several dead bodies out of them, but they don't appreciate it, you see? They look at me as if I'm to blame for what they do. They don't remember the men who got them pregnant, but they do remember, and badly, the one who removed the cancer growing inside them."
-Remorse, Juan, that's what makes their faces sour.
"That's what I say. Women are strange, Estanislao, that's why I've always only trusted the dead ones."
- So why this desire to prolong life?
The brief silence allowed them to reach the street and borrow the cart again to get to the port. It must have been five or six in the afternoon. Mendoza had told them to return no later than nightfall, or he would leave without them. A mere threat, a way of trying to convince himself to maintain control. They left the heavy bag behind and climbed in. The horse retraced its ancient route between the hospital and the port, a route it had taken for so many years. Wasn't that horse dead? Perhaps it was more useful to prolong its life than the lives of many men or women.
"Because they are the ones who give birth to men. They give warmth and shelter along with hatred and remorse. You've seen, Stanislaus, that when they breastfeed, sometimes the milk is sour and the boys vomit. And the milk is made with their blood. Alongside love, irreversible and inevitable, there is hatred and loathing, unyielding like stones rooted in everyone's path. Childbirth is so intense, so difficult and painful—you've seen it many times, my friend—that all women are afraid. They've seen it in their

mothers and their friends, aunts, or whoever, and that's why they ask for opium or morphine."
Yes, and I've told them many times that those drugs will prevent her from pushing hard enough to give birth. And to keep the baby from dying inside, we have to intervene.
Do they want the child to be born? Don't they hope that death will end all this pain? Life is pain, and anesthesia is a long, dreamless sleep. Nothing is more like death except death itself.
-Because he doesn't wake up.
"No! That's not it. False death is a double deception created by man. A doubly inverted mirror. Not only do we believe we are creating a dream we can return to at any moment (and that's the first deception: the inverted image of the left and right), but when we wake up, we are still exactly the same: the same illness and pain, on the exact day of our supposed departure into sleep, but with even more weight, because that absence has left a nostalgia we don't realize until later (and that's the other deception of the mirror: the inverted image of the inversion)."
-What gives the original image, without reflections.
-Exactly. Have you ever wondered why we look in a mirror? If by simply looking at our body with our own eyes we already see what we are, without distinguishing between left and right, and we obtain the final inverted image, of up and down, without the need for the mediating mirror.
- Heaven and hell in places contrary to what we were taught?
Sometimes up and down are inside and outside. Schemes are just caricatures that only fools learn literally.
The horse moved very slowly, its head down behind its earmuffs. It must have been blind, too. Sometimes it stumbled for no apparent reason, and the already rickety cart wobbled, forcing them to hold on tight to avoid falling.
A dog was following them. Gonçalvez looked at it intently.
"Isn't that the captain's dog?" he asked.
Valverde ignored him, but then looked at him,
-That dog knows something. He seems purebred, at least from a fallen breed. Like that great ship that looks like a Napoleonic ghost wandering down the river, lost in South American slums.
-You are a playwright, Juan.

"I'm flattered, Estanislao. Science and art have more ties than ordinary people suppose."
Aren't they one and the same? Saving someone who is dying is knowing and inventing.
Valverde watched him without letting go of the reins.
"It never ceases to amaze me, my friend. I had given up hope of finding any kind of connection in my field—I mean, connections of thought, or of soul, why not?"
When they reached the port, the horse collapsed, first onto its front legs, and then onto its hind legs. The cart almost overturned, but they got out and unharnessed the harness.
"The poor man is already dying," said the doctor.
The animal was now lying on its side, but it was not yet dead.
- What do we do? We have no weapons.
Valverde went back to the cart and took out a hoe.
-Step back a little, friend...
And he plunged the hoe into the horse's neck, right into the carotid artery. Blood gushed out, slowly slowing down.
"Who knows how much more I would have suffered without this?" said Gonçalvez.
"But did he want that? Was he suffering, or was his death painless? Who could tell us? We judge them as we judge ourselves. If I can't even understand what goes through your own mind as a man, how am I supposed to know about an animal?" Valverde said aloud to himself.
The dog had been sitting several meters away the whole time, and suddenly it howled. There was blood in its fur.
-Perhaps that's the answer, Juan.
It was almost night. The city was illuminated by oil lamps and lanterns. The river remained dark.
Valverde called the dog, and it accompanied them to the boat that was still tied to the old dock. It climbed aboard with them, and the three of them returned to the ship.

*

They entered the room where he had left Carla's body. Gonçalvez placed the bag on the floor, in the darkness, while Valverde turned on some lamps. Then the corpse appeared clear, brightly illuminated, the face with an expression frozen in uncertain anguish, pale but not too pale, the short neck with faint shadows of the hair, so blond now acquiring ashen tones, the breasts still firm, neither too large nor too small, simply the right height and size for Carla, the abdomen and pelvis, serene now forever, and the pubis, that shadow that knows pleasure and that metamorphoses into its true face sooner or later: disillusionment first, then emptiness, and finally, perpetual anguish.

Gonçalvez gazed at her, almost speechless, ecstatic, remembering the night he spent with her.

"Calm down, Estanislao," he said, putting an arm around his shoulders. "They found her dead in the bathrooms, in the early hours of the morning. No, it wasn't us; I know the crew members were with her afterward. She has bruises and lacerations, the usual stuff, you know. But I think her heart couldn't take it."

- Why did you bring her here? Didn't you tell the captain?

"The captain already has enough problems, don't you think? Besides, we have our own jobs."

They turned off the lights again, went outside, and locked the door. The ship had been moving again for half an hour, ever since they arrived. It was past midnight. They went to the kitchen and silently ate what they found. They had hot water prepared and went down to the bathrooms. The floor was stained with black shadows, but it was too late to turn on the overhead lights. The old man in charge brought them buckets and filled the tubs. Estanislao and Juan undressed and got in.

"We deserve this break," Valverde said.

Gonçalvez looked around, as if he were seeing the scenes from that night and needed to explain something.

"My friend, stop worrying. Your problem is that you dwell too much on what can't be solved. Were we to blame? There's no certainty about that. And if we were, let's not be fooled by the supposed duties the priests

preach. The law? That's an even more demonic version, because it uses reason to dismiss reason itself. Man, Estanislao, is sentimental, but more than that, a hypocrite, because he uses sentiment to exalt or defame whatever he wants, as it suits him. True reason isn't even cold, as they say, it's simply pure. As pure as that dead woman locked up over there ever was. Knowledge doesn't die, my friend, nor does reason, so overwhelming, so astonishing, that we must even rid ourselves of our admiration for it if we want to continue being rational thinkers. Man is so weak, weaker than any lamb, that he makes an idol of anything because he needs it." He is unable to walk straight in the void because he confuses the architecture of reason with the sermons of the hosts.

He stood up and approached Gonçalvez, who was looking at him and understood. Valverde had never seen such bitterness on a face, and that this bitterness stemmed from such wisdom. Estanislao is more learned than I am, he told himself. I am merely a broad-minded deducer.

He squatted down and rested his elbows on the sides of the tub. He stroked Gonçalvez's head, who was looking at him with inconsolable grief. Then he sat on the edge and, still silent, had him rest his head on his thigh, and continued stroking him. Gonçalvez was crying, but perhaps it was just the steam from the water on his face.

After a while, Gonçalvez got up and sat on the edge. Valverde started drying him, but seeing that he still looked distressed, he shook him by the shoulders.

-Come on, old friend, it seems like I've known you for centuries, your soul looks as if you were made of glass.

- What are we going to do?

-That's exactly it, to find Carla's soul and give it to Altea.

- What are you saying?

"It's just a way of defining things, nothing more. What is the soul? Is it the *anima* of the Greeks? Isn't it the psyche? And where is the psyche if not in the brain? That's where we should look for it. It's a corpuscle, that's what they say."

-But Carla is already dead...

"When are you going to get rid of this absurd scholasticism? Do body and soul separate at death? If the soul needs a body to manifest itself while it lives, why must it survive death? Isn't the mind what we call consciousness,

and isn't consciousness what we call the soul? What tells us what's right and what's wrong? The useless nonsense we've built up based on the principles of the soul is nothing but disguised expressions of our body. How much do you know about physiology, medical doctor? You know no more than one percent. The rest is letting the body do its thing, letting time pass, and learning from experience."

- *Oh, death! Come away!* - Gonçalvez murmured.

Valverde patted him on the back, congratulating him.

- How fantastic is that apparent dichotomy in the bard's verse! Only in English can such complexity be expressed in so few words.

He embraced her tightly, devoid of his usual affectation. Women soothe and ignite passion, but they are incomprehensible, Valverde told himself. Estanislao Gonçalvez's soul, however, was ancient and remained untouched by any damage. A polished enameled piece that only needed dusting from time to time. His medical studies had been nothing more than an attempt to escape an inheritance that constituted his very substance and material, but they had only led him down a harder path to the same place: his family's work was not a business—that was merely an inevitable consequence of daily life—but the function for which they had been created. What is mine? Valverde had asked himself many times. The lack of a specific discipline had confused and led him astray many times, until he stopped worrying: everything that concerned man and his humanity concerned him.

Gonçalvez had stopped crying. His several-days-old beard, stiff and prickly, brushed against Valverde's face and shoulder. There were two bodies, but the ship's darkness assimilated them. They were both an eight-legged creature, perhaps a spider. Hairy, too. Still, waiting for something to approach so it could move, but showing no sign of unease. In the darkness, they saw the long past of what was not history. It wasn't premonition or reincarnation, foolish words used to construct a flimsy scaffolding. It was, perhaps, transubstantiation, if that word meant anything at all. *To see* was perhaps the most fitting verb to define it. To see is not to feel but to verify: science seen with a prolific eye. And sometimes, blind eyes are the most lucid.

In the morning, Gonçalvez made his usual visit to Altea. Nothing had changed, except for the routine and expected decline. Valverde passed by the cabin door and stopped to listen.
"Is there any hope, doctor?" Carmen asked.
The doctor didn't answer and left with Valverde. They went into Carla's room. Gonçalvez rolled up his sleeves and began emptying the large bag. It contained jars the size of those used for preserves, and he placed them on the narrow table against a wall. Valverde began taking other small bags out of the smaller bag; these must have contained drugs and powders, ampoules, and pharmacy bottles: brumides, alkaloids, belladonna. They placed everything on the same table. Then they took out surgical instruments: forceps, scalpels, scissors, retractors, gouges, chisels, and threads.
"Is this what I think?" Gonçalvez asked, looking at the jars. He was trying to distract himself by thinking about anything other than the body that was staring at them from behind.
-That's right. Placentas. Aurora sends them to me from Entre Ríos. She's the only one who knows how to preserve them. They store them at the hospital, but they don't know how to use them without my instructions.
- Who is Aurora?
"My first cousin, or something like that. She's the daughter of my paternal uncle and aunt, though they were half-siblings on my father's side. Incest? You could say that. But from that union came one of the most amazing women around here. I wish you could meet her; I think she'd like you. Your introspective nature would mesh perfectly with her exuberant one. And your minds would be in sync; you both know so much that living together would be a constant exchange of ideas and thoughts. And the sex, my dear, would be fantastic, I'm sure."
Valverde opened the jars. Some placentas were almost whole, others were fragments. The formaldehyde dulled their sense of smell for a moment, then they picked them up with tweezers. They placed them on the table.
"When they're dry, we'll crush them into a powder. Then we'll put it in the empty jars." And she showed the small jars with rubber stoppers.
"Now we'll turn our attention to our friend. I need your anatomical knowledge, Estanislao. I can't dissect because I'd destroy what I want to recover. What I'm looking for is above the sella turcica, on the left side. I've

been researching this part of the skull base, specifically the scaphoid, for years. I've dissected many, but the brain tissue is as delicate as gelatin. I'm not looking for the bone itself, but for a corpuscle that, according to ancient anatomists, is right there: in the left posterior quadrant."
- The hypothalamus?
-Not exactly. According to some, what I'm looking for is a dependency, something like an appendage of the hypothalamus; others have seen it as completely separate.
- And what do they call it? I don't remember reading about that.
-It has no name because no one has noticed it. Herophilus was the first to describe it.
-But you're talking to me about hypotheses, Juan. Older than Methuselah. Valverde river.
-I know…
They looked at each other. Valverde would do it without him, if necessary.
-We have all day, until the placentas dry out.
Gonçalvez agreed.
Juan Valverde de Amusco then grabbed a razor from the table and shaved Carla's head. Her hair died and fell to the floor. Gonçalvez watched, his sadness slowly fading. Outside, the shouts of the crew echoed. The sound of the river mingled with the cries of many birds from the shore.
"Can I continue?" he asked.
Valverde smiled:
"It will be an honor, doctor." And he handed him the scalpel.
Estanislao Gonçalvez made a long incision in the scalp over the left parietal bone. He separated the skin from the skull. Valverde cleaned away the little blood that remained, partly liquid and partly clotted. Then he gave him the awl and hammer. Gonçalvez made perforations with sharp blows, forming a window roughly ten by ten centimeters. They sawed through the bone between the stitches and lifted the flap. The meninges were still moist and fresh. That was good, very good. Deep inside, what Valverde was looking for was still alive.
Then Gonçalvez took the trocar from Valverde's hands and slowly inserted it into the brain. He paused, looked at Carla's face, and took measurements with his fingers from her nose, eye sockets, and ears. He calculated and measured mentally. He came up with numbers and spoke them in a very

low voice. Valverde watched him, amazed. His work had always been about cutting and dissecting corpses, exploring and finding the large fragments of a dense forest where meticulousness was impossible.
The truck sank very slowly, millimeter by millimeter. Two or three times it barely moved back and then moved forward again. Gonçalvez was sweating.
"I've already touched the sphenoid bone," he said. "But I'm completely clueless about where to needle."
-For now, whatever you find around you, whether it's glands, gray matter, or anything else. We just need a few cells.
Gonálvez moved the trocar with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, one hand feeling the sensations of what the trocar touched, the consistency of the material it was exploring, the other piercing and extracting. There was only one opportunity for this single experiment; the path followed by the instrument had already damaged the rest of the tissue, a second attempt was useless.
Then he withdrew the trocar, and through the hollow tube of the cannula extracted three millimeters of soft, gray tissue, which did not disintegrate when placed in the jar that Valverde handed him. Valverde gazed at the specimen with delight.
How many bodies I threw away as useless trying to do this! We found it, my dear, we found it...
- What? - and Gonçalvez looked at Carla's dead brain.
- The soul? I don't know, I really don't know, but it's beautiful.
"We always call beautiful what we long for. But the soul is not always beautiful," Gonçalvez said as he sutured and covered Carla's skull with a bandage.
He had already verified that some deaths are not final, but if it was her soul that had been extracted, the woman was now definitely dead.

Night had already fallen, and they were still locked in the room. Several times during the afternoon, they heard someone calling them—sometimes the sailors, other times the captain or Mara. No one knew that Valverde had taken over that hitherto useless room on the second deck. Only once did someone try to open the door; voices were heard in the passageway, but no one called out to ask them to let it in.

-Tomorrow we will apply the remedies to Altea, so we need to prepare the jars.
The placentas were already dry and had shrunk to the size of simple curved or flat shells, which cracked at the touch. Valverde crushed them in a mortar, then scooped up the powder with a spoon and put it in the small jars that Gonçalvez handed him, which he then capped.
They placed each jar in each compartment of a box that was locked.
They knocked on the door again; someone must have seen lights through the crack.
"Who's there?" It was Márquez's voice. "Is that you, Valverde?"
-Yes, my friend.
- What are you doing, and who authorized you to occupy this place?
-Resting and reading, my friend. I found the place empty and dirty; it didn't occur to me that I should ask for permission.
Márquez didn't respond. His footsteps could be heard moving away down the corridor. He was probably informing the captain.
"What do we do with the body?" Gonçalvez asked.
"We'll just let the captain in, and we'll tell him the truth. He was with us that night, wasn't he?"
Ten minutes later they heard the footsteps of two men.
- Valverde, you son of a bitch! Open up right now or I'll shoot you down!
"I beg you, Captain, to go in alone. It's very important."
- What are you doing, you fucking idiot! It's okay!
The door was unlocked and barely opened for Mendoza to pass through.
The captain looked at Valverde, ready to hit him, but saw the doctor.
"I should have known this madman convinced him, doctor. He's neglected his duties to Altea..."
-Captain, if I was absent for an afternoon it was so I could make it up later...
Then Mendoza saw the corpse. He grabbed his head with his hands and buried his face in them.
-We found her dead, captain, in the early morning.
-But you said...
- What do you want me to say? That a bunch of men, including us, raped her all night and she couldn't take it? Or that it was the drugs and she fell to the floor so many times that it explained the bruises she has?

Mendoza had had to sort out countless irregularities since leaving Buenos Aires: cabotage permits, trade licenses, violations on board the ship, undeclared work contracts. He had connections in every government office along the Paraná River, through himself and his family. No, they didn't touch him for all that. They hadn't even boarded the ship when someone came to report the shooting of Altea. He'd spent more on bribes than on the repairs. But if they found out about that whore's death, he wasn't sure he'd get away with it anymore.

- And what do you plan to do, Valverde? Keep it here until it rots?

-I'll get her out tonight, captain.

Mendoza saw the medical instruments on the table, the dirty rags, and the medicine bottles.

"It's all for Mrs. Altea and the boy, Captain," said Gonçalvez.

And she believed him.

He left, closing the door behind him. They heard him say not to disturb them in that room anymore.

They didn't have dinner that night.

Gonçalvez left with the vials of powder and the tissue sample he had taken from Carla. Valverde told him to go to his room and not come out until morning, when he would come to get him. Valverde took out the remaining large vials. He covered his mouth and nose with a thick cloth. He put on leather gloves. He put on goggles. He uncapped the vials. He could still smell the intense fumes. He checked his boots, in case any liquid spilled on the floor. And he began pouring the acid onto the body. He could see how it quickly corroded it, billowing out puffs of smoke that soon dissipated into the air. The smell and the heat intensified. He poured all the vials, but the woman's body wasn't large. She was almost like a grown child.

He went out and closed the door. He went to his cabin. He didn't sleep. At four in the morning he returned to his room, remembering to get equipped as before. On the table were the remains of charred bones. With a shovel, he put them in a small bag. He went out into the still-dark corridor, took off his protective gear except for his gloves. He went down two flights of stairs to the boiler room. The stoker was lying on the floor, as usual, drunk and half-naked. Valverde opened the hatch and threw the bag inside.

The crackle of fire as the door opened and closed made the guard stir in his sleep. The black man's sooty body was dripping with liquor. But he didn't wake up.
Valverde returned to his cabin, undressed, and lay down between fresh sheets.

*

He was up by six in the morning, and while he was urinating in the chamber pot, there was a knock on his cabin door. The captain was calling him to his office. He swore under his breath, and the stream wet the floor. He finished getting dressed. He wouldn't pay any attention.
He left and went straight to Gonçalvez's room. He knocked two or three times, received no answer, but a lamplight still flickered beneath the door, dimmed by the morning light from the porthole. He opened it and saw the doctor lying down, still dressed. He must have been awake just a short while ago and was now fast asleep. He felt bad about waking him, but there was no other choice. He sat on the bed and touched his face. The dark beard and long features reminded him of the men he had known in his childhood in Brazil. Valverde was of Portuguese descent, but by the time his grandparents had settled in America, they were no longer wealthy. They were educated, cultured, and their religion was a mixture of Catholicism interwoven with elements of Protestantism and the Lutheran Reformation. And all of this culminated in an atheism that took root in the only plausible support for freethinking men and women like them: science, whatever its form. Natural or supernatural, because those names denoted nothing more than transitory ignorance, soon overcome by nascent knowledge.
The men from Brazil he had met on the farm where his father raised chickens and sheep, and cultivated a coffee so rare it was difficult to harvest in abundance, were like Gonçalves: tall and thin, with hairy,

skeletal bodies, and a gaze always bordering on anguish. Once, he had gone to sell a sack of coffee in town. He went on horseback; he was sixteen years old and had his own collection of herbs and animals in a shed in a secluded spot on the farm. The sack smelled splendid. How had his father achieved that aroma? He had been very young when he had seen him crush the coffee beans on the kitchen table in front of his mother. Different beans that he had brought from different places, from Brazil or from Ecuador and Colombia when foreigners arrived, and in that way he had built many trade relationships. Sometimes he would send one or two sacks to his elderly relatives in Lisbon. But the climate didn't help; the coffee he harvested was so delicate that if he didn't take the necessary precautions, it soon withered.

That day in town, he met a buyer on his way to Buenos Aires. His name was Gaspar Santos, and he was a merchant who was going to settle there. They sat down at the bar, the man greeted the boy and smelled the bag. He lamented the lack of production, because it would allow the Valverdes to recover the fortune they had lost in their old homeland. No, Juan said, his father didn't know how to get more out of that coffee. Many times it was like a miracle, but he said that miracles are nothing more than the lucidity of a man on a particular day, when everything ceased to exist, and a single thing prevailed in a void. That something was the miracle, devoid of help or obstacle, of external energy or whatever you wanted to call it. Such concentration that the core of that something possessed its true and total potential, devoid of any distraction. That miracle didn't need to be demonstrated; it was there, and it unfolded on its own. The aroma of that coffee was something like that.

Then an old man, wearing a threadbare suit and smelling of grime, stood beside them. Santos looked at him and laughed, but Juan Valverde watched him with suspicious eyes. He told him not to worry, that even though he looked like a vagabond, he was practically the owner of the world. Because he was Domingo Gonçalves, one of the richest men in Brazil. Gravediggers and undertakers, with family all over South America, and from the high Portuguese aristocracy. The old man ignored the boy and spoke to the merchant in his ear. "All right," said the merchant, and handed him a thick wad of bills. The old man left.

The boy watched curiously. What had the old man done to deserve such a large sum of money from Santos? Santos told him to disregard the transaction. "My wife recently passed away," he explained. "Expenses for the wake, the funeral, and the burial—all the pomp and ceremony she deserved, given her high social standing. I had to do all this to avoid upsetting my in-laws." He approached the boy and squeezed his left forearm, which was resting on the table. He talked and talked, unable to contain himself. He said many things, all jumbled and confusing. His breath smelled of whiskey.

Juan Valverde feared that, in that state, and after so much money had been taken from Santos's pocket, she wouldn't pay him back for the bag of coffee. And then the whole chaotically recounted story by Santos suddenly fell into place. The woman was from an aristocratic family, and he was a simple cloth merchant. He had met her one day when she went to buy fabric for a dress for her lady's companion. No, she didn't dress in places like that; she had only gone to Gaspar Santos's cramped shop out of necessity. Were they going to the theater, or perhaps to a salon? Whatever it was, that day Santos's future wife was charmed by the merchant's smile. Attraction, perhaps, sex more than love. They eloped, got married, and returned. The family forgave the wayward daughter and accepted the commoner on the condition that he be put to the test. But the merchant wasn't very bright, as he soon demonstrated. He asked his wife for money to start one business after another, and they all failed. Then, he asked for money to live without working. After that, there was no more sex, and later, arguments became the only interaction between the spouses.

She had died at thirty-six, a month before that afternoon in the bar. How had she died, the boy wanted to know? She died one day, just like that, in bed. He found her one morning when he went to see if she had any jewelry he could pawn, because lately she'd been spending some nights with her lover. She was lying face up, one arm dangling off the bed and a trickle of blood running from her lower lip. The family arrived and had an investigation done. The servants said they heard the lady screaming, and the voice of a man hurling insults and blows, but it was so different from Santos's subdued voice that they couldn't be sure it was him.

Gaspar Santos, a merchant. An expert at convincing those who didn't want to buy to do so. Juan Valverde, even at his young age, had seen many. And

the strength of the hand that gripped his forearm was considerable, and the merchant's shoulders were used to lifting heavy rolls of cloth.
It was almost night. Juan had been persuaded to drink more than usual. He was drunk, but Santos was even more so. He kept repeating the same refrain: "It wasn't me, it wasn't me," and bowing as if he were facing a law enforcement officer. Finally, he fell asleep in his chair, his arms dangling, his head thrown back, his mouth open, snoring loudly. The other patrons laughed. When almost everyone had left, Juan Valverde approached, pretended to help him settle back on the table, and checked his pockets. There were more bills, and he took them all out. When he went outside, he counted them; there weren't many, barely more than the value of a bag of coffee.

He touched the doctor's face again. He looked very much like the old man he had known so many years before, but the one beside him had gone to great lengths to distinguish himself from his family, and had only succeeded in getting himself into the mire. But how to use that term? Getting yourself into the mire was the family's profession, and they made money from it. Profiting from the death of others, is that getting yourself into the mire? Estanislao had understood it that way, and he studied medicine to save men before his family buried them, and he distanced himself as much as possible. But he had gained neither money nor prestige, nor even satisfaction: people died, and he himself buried them. Slowly, he would return, head bowed and ashamed, to the center from which he had fled. That was written in the anguish on his face as he slept. There are men so transparent, Valverde told himself, that they are like water: they dilute what is unhealthy and become irrevocably contaminated.
Estanislao woke up and covered his eyes.
"I know," he said.
She got up and washed her face. The water in the basin was dirty and lukewarm. She turned away, looking with cloudy, half-closed eyes.
-We'll have plenty of coffee served when we get to the room.
He picked up Gonçalvez's briefcase where he had put some surgical instruments and the box with the bottles.
José Iribarne was in Altea's cabin, having spent the night there, and Natacha had entered shortly before.

"Good morning, doctor," she said. "We were expecting you yesterday afternoon..."
Iribarne got up from his chair, stretching, which he tried to hide so as not to lessen his angry expression.
-Doctor, Altea is very ill and you deign to neglect your duties.
For Gonçalvez, who was tired and irritated, this was enough to fully awaken him. Those who knew him as calm and submissive were surprised.
"You don't need to tell me about the lady's condition, dear sir. I've seen her since she fell ill, and I checked on her just yesterday morning. Sitting there staring at her like you are won't make her any better. Besides, I've been busy, precisely studying her case."
Her expression was firm, her face serious. José did not answer her.
"Now, if you'll excuse me, I ask you to leave the room. We're going to begin a more aggressive and definitive treatment with Valverde."
Natacha looked at each one, and remained silent.
"Madam," Gonçalvez said to her, "would you be so kind as to ask for plenty of coffee and something light for breakfast?"
"Of course, doctor." And as he was leaving, he found Máximo at the door, who ignored him. He rushed in, angry and almost shouting.
- Valverde! I ordered him to come to my office almost an hour ago.
"I'm sorry, captain," said Gonçalvez, "but we can't postpone this, I need Valverde."
Few respected Valverde, but the doctor's voice, so firm now, increased the professional authority that had always been implicit.
"Don't mind him, doctor. My husband makes those little warbles now and then so he doesn't forget he's the captain of this old ship..." Natacha smiled ironically, but suddenly she became serious, looking into the back of the room. "All right, dear..." Her voice then sounded sad.
Everyone stared at her, wondering who she was talking to. José tapped a finger at his temple. That woman was crazy, he made the others understand. She didn't see him, lowered her head, and spoke to Máximo like a submissive wife apologizing. Someone else, perhaps, someone she respected, was watching her.
"Come on, Máximo, let's let the doctor and his assistant do their work." He glanced behind him, and his face lit up with relief as he saw a smile or a kind gesture appear in the shadow behind the bed.

José Iribarne had not moved.
-José, please leave us alone.
Valverde, I'm very grateful to you for what you did for me, but I'm not leaving here. I want to see what they're going to do to you.
Valverde was about to answer when he saw Mara arrive to save the situation.
"My dear, they have to do their job. I trust them. We all have a mission to fulfill, and it's the same one. Isn't that right, Juan?"
Iribarne hesitated to resist a little longer, and finally gave in. They left and closed the door.
While they were preparing the surgical kit and the bottles, Carmen arrived with the coffee. She looked at the medical instruments, made the sign of the cross, and left. Valverde locked the door.
He removed the bandage that covered Altea's left eye socket and head. Her hair had grown back and was washed daily. The scar was dry, but instead of new tissue forming to fill the void left by the dead eye, or the remains of it, it was empty.
Gonzálvez illuminated the background with his handheld flashlight.
-Nothing but emptiness, and in the background Zinn's ring, clear and clean.
"Nature is wise," Valverde said, laughing. But the doctor didn't laugh.
-Or as if she were waiting for us.
He shone a light on her right eye after lifting her eyelid.
"Blind, as always. But I assure you, Juan, that when I shone the light on the bandage in his left eye, he would react with some kind of reflex. Now he doesn't anymore..."
-Because she's dying...we have to inject her as soon as possible.
They turned her on her side and exposed her back. Valverde washed her while Gonzálvez prepared the syringes. Then he palpated a space between her lumbar vertebrae, punctured it with the needle, and extracted cerebrospinal fluid. He placed it in the vial, and the powder dissolved. He refilled the plunger and returned to the same intervertebral space. He injected very slowly.
"How much?" he asked.
-I don't know...the whole syringe. It will be one per day, at least, or we'll adjust it depending on how it progresses.

They had finished that phase. They turned Altea back into her original position. She was breathing slowly, cold, and pale. Gonçalvez listened to her abdomen. The fetus was still resisting.
"He seems to be healthier than her," she said.
Around noon, there was a knock at the door. It was Mara.
"We're fine," Valverde replied.
There were whispers behind the door. Iribarne must have been asking Mara something, or perhaps it was the captain.
"Who is the one who really loves this woman?" Gonçalvez asked.
"You should ask yourself if anyone really cares about her. Iribarne is a failure; I think he's only interested in his nephew. And the captain, well, he's an enigma... I heard he was her lover and that he was the one who shot her by accident. It must be guilt, surely, stronger than love."
They ate something while they chatted. They went back to work.
The piece containing the sample of glandular or neuronal tissue—they couldn't be sure what they had extracted because they didn't have a microscope—was in a smaller jar than the others. Valverde took it out of the central compartment. The others were arranged by day and quantity. He unwrapped the cloth that protected it.
- Ready?
Gonçalvez nodded. He had the surgical kit open and the forceps clean, and Altea's face was twenty centimeters from his own. She was reclining on several pillows, and they had tied her down so she wouldn't rock or fall. Valverde brought the vial closer. Gonçalvez inserted the forceps and took the specimen. He carefully inserted it into the orbit. Once inside, he saw the original tissue, destroyed or necrotic. All of it was dead, and what was he introducing? More dead tissue. What was he doing? How had he let himself be deceived by Valverde? It all seemed like pure scientific fantasy. A utopia in an imaginary world. But he had seen things, he thought, that he had never been able to explain. A boy's bone that breaks and mends itself as if it had never been broken. A woman who wakes up after four months in a coma. A leg that one day is vital, and the next must be amputated. Medicine is more like magic than science, he told himself. Ignorance is a goddess that refuses to be defeated.
We doctors are builders of fallacies.

He placed the piece against the entrance to Zinn's ring, then pushed it in with a blunt-tipped stylus. There were no nerves or vessels in the opening. The piece pierced it, and there it stayed. It wouldn't move, and if Altea's brain didn't reject it, it would form new tissue, perhaps anastomoses, and even, maybe, synapses. He laughed at her gullibility. Valverde is Frankenstein, surely, but I am Faust.
"What's so funny?" Valverde asked.
-What we're doing. A dark comedy that could turn into a horror novel.
Valverde celebrated with hilarity the wise wit of his friend.
-I'll take care of the rest.
She filled the empty eye socket with cotton and re-bandaged it. She took out the pillows and they laid Altea down. It was five in the afternoon and everything was finished. All that remained was to wait.
They opened the door. Iribarne was sitting in a chair in the hallway. The captain was pacing the far end of the corridor, trying to remain unnoticed despite the sound of his boots.
"Well?" Iribarne asked. Mara appeared a moment later, grabbing his arm, ready to stop him if anything bad happened.
The operation went as we hoped. She needs injections every day. We have to keep waiting.
"Is he going to get better?" Mendoza asked, approaching timidly. He looked at Valverde no longer with resentment but with respect, but he was addressing the doctor.
"Will he recover? I think that was always beyond our control, Captain. The goal was for the boy to survive. That's what we tried to do, and there are still no guarantees. Doctors aren't magicians, even though it might sometimes seem that way. We only have two hands and a brain that works like an old engine."
Gonçalvez's tone suddenly changed; from firm to weak. His eyes clouded over and his lips trembled. Mara noticed and approached to take his hands.
"They are beautiful hands, doctor." And he kissed them.
Gonçalvez was crying. Valverde put an arm around his shoulders, and between him and Mara they took him to his cabin.
Iribarne and the captain stood alone in the hallway, facing the closed door. Neither dared to enter, nor to speak to each other. They turned away, each walking in opposite directions.

When the sound of the boots stopped, something very faint could be heard from inside the room. If someone had stayed there with their ear to the door, they might have heard a sound that resembled a voice, but wasn't, or perhaps the sound of wind passing through a throat. But sometimes sounds resemble words, and the imagination can easily conjure up many things. For example, that someone was praying.

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The days passed as they did for the towns on both banks of the Paraná River. They had left Paso de la Patria five days earlier and the Paraguayan coast was already to port. They stopped at Itatí, where Mendoza had many friends in the garrison. They stayed almost a day, from the afternoon they arrived until the following morning, when they set sail again. The captain had gone ashore with Iribarne and they stayed all night. At dawn they came aboard, looking sleepy. Mendoza's uniform was immaculate, but his boots were dirty and the buttons on his jacket were torn. Iribarne was dressed with his usual carelessness, his linen trousers held up by a rope at the waist and his shirt open. Those who saw them come aboard said they had been with prostitutes, and they laughed when they saw Mara leaning on the railing, looking with resentful eyes at the man she called her lover. But no one heard the usual shouts. She was surely concerned with something more important than simply relieving Iribarne of his lust. As for Mendoza, Natasha was only his wife on paper; everyone knew that.
By the time they reached Ituzaingó, three weeks had passed, with stopovers in small ports where they unloaded cargo, and Márquez had conducted a fair amount of business. Mendoza was happy, or at least somewhat relieved of his financial woes, but above all, they noticed a change in him each time Dr. Gonçalvez emerged from Altea's cabin and announced a new improvement. Everyone was astonished by the change in Altea's appearance. Her previously gaunt, sallow face had begun to regain

color, and her cheekbones and neck were becoming fuller. Her body, except for her pregnant belly, which resembled a protruding tumor on a frail skeleton, was gradually returning to its normal shape.
The doctor and Valverde went once a day to administer the injections into Altea's spinal cord. After the third time, Natacha had asked Gonçalvez, because she hardly spoke to Valverde, if she could stay and witness the procedure. She could also help him or learn to do it herself when he was busy. The doctor glanced askance at Valverde and replied:
-If it doesn't impress you, ma'am, I don't think there will be a problem.
"Impressed, doctor, after what I've seen this woman suffer? Do you take me for a fool?"
"That wasn't my intention, ma'am. I only wanted to preserve the customs."
"Those who consider women weak and idiotic, when it's us whose wombs tear apart every time we have children. Excuse me, doctor, I didn't expect that from you, but I see..." For a moment everyone thought she wouldn't say it, but once she'd let her tongue run away with her, she added, "Sometimes I forget you're a country doctor."
The village doctor took out the syringes and vials. He told Natacha to turn Altea onto her side. She didn't need instructions to clean the skin with soap and water and then dry it thoroughly. Then she stood beside the doctor, her restless hands clasped on her chest, watching and following his every move, noticing the exquisite touch in Gonçalvez's fingers. She saw the bone marrow fluid flow, the powder dissolve in the vial, and the blood injected again. When he finished, he covered Altea, tucked her in, and sat down.
"What's in those jars, doctor?" When she saw his expression, she raised her hands and warned him: "And don't treat me like I'm ignorant, I know as much as you do about all this, and a few things more."
He had a boastful expression on his face that he decided not to utter, out of magnanimity to the village doctor, who after all was saving Altea and the boy.
-Placental cells, ma'am.
Natacha heard him and suddenly her face became all attention and respect.
- Did you buy them at the hospital?
-Let's say it's a swap, Valverde is the trader, he already knows that.
I imagine, and I'm now certain, that Altea will make a full recovery. She still hasn't opened her right eye, she doesn't say a word, but I'm sure she

can hear us. I see her get restless, especially when that unpleasant man, Iribarne, is here. He comes less often now because he can see her better, but when he does come, she frowns and sometimes moves her fingers a little. I know she's awake, but she can't communicate with us.
-That's right, ma'am. The brain damage is profound, and we don't know how many of her functions have been lost.
-Look at your left eye, doctor.
Gonçalvez had already done it many times, and on just as many occasions he had explained that there was no eye but a simple hole.
-There's nothing.
“But I see something, Doctor. A shadow in the background. As if she were watching us…” For a moment, Natacha was flustered. She shook her hands as if shooing away flies or ghosts and said, “Forgive me for these fantasies of mine; sometimes I get carried away. You know my father was a very cultured man. He was the one who taught me to value books, and since then I read and retain everything I can get my hands on. I miss him so much that sometimes, only when I’m tired and I start talking to Altea, I think it’s him watching me. But from where, I wonder? And I stare at my left eye—oh, well, the hollow you mentioned. But many things are hidden in hollows, Doctor, things you can’t imagine.”
Then Natacha smiled, and only Gonçalvez could see that smile that no one else saw or would ever see on the captain's wife's face. It was a smile of nostalgia, as if she were gazing through a long lens at a paradise she could never reclaim, and yet which peeked through Altea's left eye.

The next day, José Iribarne spent the entire afternoon in the cabin. It was shortly after the visit to Itatí. It seemed his relationship with Mara had settled into a peaceful existence, a mutual understanding where they both yielded to avoid hurting each other. He knew she had other things on her mind, for example, the boy and Altea. She had something planned, but she wasn't going to ask him. And José now believed he had overcome that hostile independence she boasted of. She was different; she no longer drank and spent her afternoons strolling on deck, joking with the men, sometimes making advances, but never giving in. Because there was something else in her eyes that José couldn't define, a concern that made her raise her head to the evening sky, as if she were hoping to see

something. And he believed it was the moon she longed to see, because more than once he saw her finally at peace when the night sky was clear and the moonlight illuminated the river like a path to El Dorado.
That afternoon Natacha wasn't there. She had a headache, she said when he came in. He thought he'd seen her too engrossed, her head tilted over Altea's face. When he greeted her upon entering, he saw her look slightly surprised and notice a sign of concern. For a few seconds, Natacha, oblivious to the fact that this man she loathed was staring at her, glanced around the room, the way one follows someone with their eyes, and then settled back on Altea's face.
- Is something wrong, ma'am?
-Nothing, my eyes are tired and I have a headache.
-Go and rest, I'll take care of it.
She left reluctantly and resignedly, almost shielding herself from the fading daylight. She said something he didn't hear, but he was used to hearing her talk to herself. She was either crazy or just hysterical, poor Mendoza, he told himself. And he sat down beside Altea's bed.
Many times during his vigils he had contemplated the sick woman's naked body, so different from the one he had known that night of the rituals, and yet so the same. The body that Manuel had possessed, that he had taught him to possess. And his brother was dead.
How had he tried to hold on to him? He knew Manuel both hated and loved him. It was the familiar bond between brothers: the constant fighting, the almost eternal envy, and yet the physical connection that couldn't be broken without intense pain, and above all, the mental bond: knots of thought in which one was hopelessly tied to the other. In every thought, in every desire, at every moment, he knew Manuel was thinking of him, because he was his older brother, and José had managed to create that need, which was also his own: the need to possess him, to shape him, to mold him. Manuel's life was not life without José's.
First Altea, as a failed attempt, or as an arrogant insult of resentment. Then the boy, his, all three of them knowing that he was his.
And that beautiful, exotic and joyful revenge: that of giving Manuel a son, a son who was both of theirs: José's, of course, but also Manuel's, because she was his wife.
Father-uncle-stepfather-mother-sister-in-law-wife.

A sextet of characters played by three singers seasoned in the theatre of tragedy and absurdity.
But Manuel was gone. She hadn't considered that her brother could die, that his frail teenage flesh could also decay. She tolerated the distance because she longed to think of him, but she couldn't grasp the meaning of his death.
The boy was there, growing up.
What name would you give it?
Perhaps he was thinking aloud without realizing it, because suddenly he saw Altea wiggling her toes under the sheets. Then, her lips, or rather, she just pursed them in a gesture of irritation, or perhaps fear.
"Don't worry, my dear, I'm here," he said, squeezing her hand.
Altea was trembling, and then José approached her face. He smelled her, as he had that time, and Altea's body regained the aroma of burnt spices and the smoke of the bonfires.
He kissed her on the left cheek, and then his gaze sank into the hollow of her eye socket.
Manuel was at the bottom of the well, struggling in a circle that seemed to narrow at the end, but which he never reached. José saw Manuel's face illuminated by the light in the room, his eyes like a frightened boy's, but with a grown beard. He was writhing in pain, clutching his groin, blood trickling between his fingers. And the blood stained the walls of Altea's eye socket with a dark red like that of a winter twilight.
The river was heading towards the tropical winter. The Brazilian rainforest, whose winter consists of a hell of humidity and mosquitoes. And bats screeching in their low flights.
José got up and left the cabin, covering his ears as he had seen Natacha covering her face.
Strange things were emerging from the eye socket. Northern lights and thunder that condensed and vanished in the room. Ice on the surface and fire deep within.

Altea stayed alone for a long time, quiet and calm.
The door had been left open, and Máximo had come to visit her. He was surprised to see her alone for the first time since the night of the shooting. He went in and sat in the chair Iribarne had occupied. He had never been

alone with her since that night (gunshots, caimans splashing in the water, dying, blood on the deck, broken bottles, drunkenness and gunshots, the cold of the revolver barrel against his head, and Altea's body, and her strong hand pushing him away).
He took her left hand. It was as cold as resentment.
He moved aside the lock of hair that partially covered her face.
He had done what he saw: the beautiful face forever deformed, at least until death, this time more merciful than ever, took it in its hands to undo it definitively, and thus erase the beginning and the end of that face. All its features blurred into nothingness, just as his entire body would be. At some point, during the trip to Saint Lucia, he had thought that he would like that boy to be his. In a way, he had several fathers who could have fought for him. But all three were too cowardly, or rather selfish, which is a more refined form of cowardice.
He remembered Aurora Valverde. Why was he remembering her now, after all this time?
It was that I saw her, clearly, in Altea's eye.
Yes, he knew she wouldn't forgive him. It wasn't enough for her to have a wife, not even a mistress; she also wanted possession of a capricious night.
But had he even explained it to her? Was it necessary?
Aurora spoke to him soundlessly from the depths of the orbit, exhaling circles with printed letters. But he didn't understand the language, because it was a mixture of many languages, all of them drawn from the books in the library of the house in Saint Lucia. And the books were indistinguishable from those in old Krakovsky's library.
Women and books.
The women he had loved, women full of letters whose bodies were an assembly of infinite combinations of printing types, and whose spirits were an architecture of contradictory philosophies that fought and killed each other and got up again to fight.
But Altea didn't have those habits. She liked dresses and conversation. Sometimes she was cold and distant, but he had managed to break down the icy barrier that her Nordic ancestry bestowed upon her like a stigma. Altea was sometimes so haughty that she easily crumbled under the weight of her naiveté, which stemmed not from ignorance but from a profound

sense of blessing, a wise kindness that casts aside distrust because it considers it vulgar and terribly harmful.
The height of Altea was a vulnerable stronghold. Or was it?
In her eye lived the witch Aurora Valverde. Altea had molded her from the stuff of resentment, so firm and macabre that it could even unravel the foundations of her edifice. Altea had finally given way and fallen into the mud that filled the depths of her dead eye. From the mud emerged Aurora, pure image without spirit, pure engineering of words. And she saw the rifle that Aurora's mother had used to kill her father.
The gun barrel protruded from the edges of Altea's orbit.
Máximo Mendoza turned his face away, backed into the room until he tripped over the bed leg, a dirty dress stained with blood, and a broken cup. Reaching the door, still retreating and without taking his eyes off the gun pointed at him, he gripped the frame, biting his tongue to hide his fear. And he escaped, as he always had, and that also always served as a reason for his eternal wallowing in lamentation and impotence.
The helplessness of his miniature spirit, surrounded by giants.
A heart as small as the rudder of the warship he had bought.

On the last day of April, they left Ituzaingó and entered the vast Paraná River basin, which is like a great lake, almost a sea, because, sailing through its center, the shores are hardly visible to the naked eye.
Gonçalvez was sitting in a wicker chair very early in the morning. He was drinking mate, which he sipped rather carelessly. Sometimes he would fill it with water from the kettle and hold it in his hand without sipping, enraptured by the vastness of the river. It was hot, but he always wore his serge trousers, boots, and the white linen shirt that he rolled up when he examined patients. Lately, he shaved very infrequently, but this morning he had done so without care, because he had been sleepless almost all night, and as soon as he saw a glimmer of light appear on the horizon, he got up, washed, and began to shave. The mirror was large, almost full-length; the captain had given him one of the best cabins when Altea had begun to improve. In truth, that privilege should have been for Valverde, but he had to continue with this charade. But was it real? he wondered. Valverde knew a great deal, even about anatomy, but he knew about living men. An

operation is not a dissection, even if it resembles one. The dead will remain dead, no matter how delicately it is handled.
The vastness worried him. It was as if a great emptiness were growing in his soul, one that would need to be filled, and he feared what might enter, because he wouldn't be able to control it. The wide river, golden in the morning sun, was a pristine surface, so much so that it seemed like marble. If it hadn't been for the birds that occasionally disturbed the eternal smoothness of the water in search of food, or for the greetings they received from the men on the boat as they passed by, he might have believed himself to be in some kind of limbo.
That's it. Estanislao Gonçalvez, as always, remained in a kind of limbo from which he feared being expelled, and which nevertheless caused him suffering. The opposing forces fought over him: the family business, which was nothing more than a vast engineering feat built upon the world's cemeteries, and the family he had created for himself, along with the profession in which he had carved out a niche for himself, albeit with too much effort, so much so that he had never felt entirely comfortable.
He thought of his wife and son. What were they doing now? What would she think of him after receiving that hasty note and hearing nothing more for almost two months? Had he abandoned them? Of course not. Are you sure, Stanislaus? Since he had boarded that ship that had once belonged to two noble and great dead beasts, he was undoubtedly being guided by Acheron, and the river, enormous and endless, seemed to have no end except in the North, at once claustrophobic and agoraphobic. Immense open spaces that were, in turn, representations of closed spaces: dense, hot, and dark jungles, where every sound was death hissing in the ears.
He got up and put the mate gourd and kettle on the floor. He grabbed his briefcase and went to Altea's room. Carmen was finishing cleaning her up.
"Good morning, doctor," she said cheerfully. "You see the sick woman, thanks to you she's thriving. Look at her smile!"
Was that a smile or the aftermath of scars?
-Well, we'll see.
She began taking the things for the injection out of her briefcase. Valverde hardly ever appeared anymore; he'd left her the leading role, but he remained in the background, because that's what he liked: observing the world and only intervening very occasionally. The others came in for about

half an hour, and they generally preferred not to be alone with Altea. So Natacha, Máximo, and José would sit and talk, not always all three together; sometimes it was one pair, sometimes another, and they spoke as if there had never been any quarrels between them. They didn't want to be silent, and they hardly looked at Altea except to tuck her in or give her a little affection without actually looking at her face.

Carmen stayed; she was used to the treatment. She wondered what this marvelous remedy was, and when she got off in Ituzaingó, she had told all about it to the women she hadn't seen in a long time. Carmen was simple and had worked a little of everything: as a maid and nurse, as a harvester and a prostitute. Her last job had been in Valverde's ranks, but she hoped to get rid of him. She liked taking care of people, and she had come down to the city hoping to find work. She found nothing but old prostitutes who were good for nothing more than cleaning latrines at the mayor's house. But they talked, and soon the rumor of what was happening on the "Juan Manuel" would begin to spread along the river and throughout the province.

When Gonçalvez finished, Carmen rearranged the pillows again, and Altea's head turned toward the doctor, almost touching his face. It wasn't a conscious gesture, surely, but he saw the hollow of her eye. And suddenly he imagined a kaleidoscope. It was very similar to that succession of images passing one after another on the thin layer of eye crust that sometimes formed during the night. Like a screen onto which photos were projected, photos that came from... where?

Photos in motion.

He recognized his wife with the baby in her arms, at the door of their house, greeting someone. He saw her inside, cooking. He saw her sleeping next to the child. The obituary on the table, torn. Then she was packing suitcases, and Aurelio was crying, crawling on the floor. She was leaving, but where to, if he had no parents or siblings? The village priest appeared to one side of the image, and the three of them stood motionless, as if the projection had frozen. They were talking, probably, in a long conversation. Then the priest picked Aurelio up and made the sign of the cross on his forehead. And then the darkness of the room in their house suddenly lit up, and it was no longer an enclosed space but the great sea, the immense sea where she and Aurelio were traveling. And Spain was so different it was

like another planet. The images were so many and so fast that he couldn't grasp them one by one. Sometimes there was a wrinkled old woman who resembled his wife, and sometimes a young man he didn't know. Could the old woman be a distant relative of his wife? Had she remarried this young man?

He realized that the years passed like images, faster than the reality to which man's fragile perception has accustomed us. Aurelio had grown up and was a tall, still beardless young man, his skin as white as a sheet, walking along a cobblestone street, knocking on doors and returning to the street sad and dejected. He saw him knock several times in front of a huge wooden door, above which rose the tower of a bell tower. They opened it for him, and he disappeared into the shadows.

The hollow of his eye grew dark, but it wasn't filled with emptiness, but rather with twilight, which is sometimes a gloomy presence made of shattered fragments. And in the shadows, Aurelio went back and forth, between walls and altars, working. He sowed in a black garden and harvested. He dug channels in the earth and gazed at the dark convent ceiling. He wept a lot, and Estanislao remembered the crying of the little boy he had known, so similar, it was as if he were seeing him in his kitchen, pointing at the ceiling as he often did, saying what he couldn't yet pronounce because he didn't yet have the words in his vocabulary to name the one who was calling him.

Christ appeared to Aurelio in the convent.

He taught her a vocabulary made of thoughts.

He saw the pain, the despair built with great black wings.

He heard that another man-child was beside him, also desperate.

Did it resemble Altea? No.

Did he resemble the Iribarne brothers, perhaps? There were certain features in that other young seminarian that recalled José Menéndez Iribarne's moon-like face: the prominent chin, the broad forehead, the abundant hair. He was handsome, in a way; he was attractive.

Aurelio was so delicate that it was scary to speak to him for fear of hurting him.

The other man was so comfortable in his place, as if he had hardly traveled. Was he Spanish? His accent suggested it, but he had the shadow of a beard like those of the conquerors of America. The jungle had played a part in his

upbringing; it was evident in his heat and his fearlessness, in his quick temper, and in the dexterity with which he had taken up the shovel he had been using to dig in the same earth as Aurelio.
The last image vanished before Estanislao could grasp it with his fingers and hold it forever in the palm of his hand, like an eye he could contemplate every time he opened his fist.
The shovel hit Aurelio's head, and then the torrent of overflowing water carried away the debris of time.
Estanislao Gonçalvez covered his face with his hands and bent over, resting his elbows on his knees. Carmen placed a hand on his head, stroking it.
"Cry, doctor, if you want. What you've done is beautiful. In my village, back in Bahia, they say that God is another name for a doctor."

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By the time they arrived in Posadas, the rumor of the "resurrected" woman had spread so widely that a large crowd of townspeople awaited them at the port. Some waved and greeted the ship, while others called for Dr. Gonçalvez to come ashore and treat them. There were people on crutches and in wheelchairs, children with twisted arms and legs, and men on canvas stretchers carried by others.
When Máximo saw all this from the deck, he wondered how he would handle the fanaticism they couldn't possibly satisfy, because Dr. Gonçalvez was just a doctor and nothing more. Then he thought, fame wouldn't hurt. They needed the money, and the merchants of Misiones would be eager to do business with the most famous ship on the Paraná River.
But the police were also at the port, trying to persuade people to leave and return home. If the police were investigating, if the authorities were searching the ship, if they knew about the weapons and Carla… Mendoza wondered all of this as the ship stopped its engines in the middle of the river and he gazed at the port. The city stretched out behind it, with its low

buildings, mud-brick structures from the Jesuit era, newer shacks, warehouses, and a school.
Márquez and some of the men leaned over to watch, laughing and pointing at people: at that lame man, or the pregnant woman, or that hunchbacked boy. Valverde arrived and laughed at his success, because that's what it was. Gonçalvez approached shyly and accepted the jokes and congratulations of the others.
"You'll have a lot of work, doctor!" one of the men told him.
"Shut up!" shouted the captain. "Doctor, you're not leaving the ship. I assure you. I'll speak with the authorities in Posadas and sort this out."
"But the people demand it..." Valverde said. The sarcasm suited him well.
"Then go," Máximo told him. "And cure all those people, if they let you live first."
Two boats were launched. In one was Mendoza with two men, and in the other, three more, all armed. They reached the port and the crowd surged towards them. There were few police officers and the crowd managed to evade them, but everyone was fighting to get to the boats. Mendoza stood up and took aim.
-I'll kill anyone who comes near.
The others did the same. Six rifles were pointed at the people. Everyone fell silent and backed away.
"We just want the doctor..." said a woman with a boy in her arms.
"The doctor won't get off the ship; he's not a miracle worker to be demanded like this..."
- But they say he resurrected a woman, the captain's wife…
-I am the captain, the woman is not my wife, just a passenger, she never died so she didn't need to be revived.
They seemed content for now. Most turned around and began to disperse, not entirely convinced, for they looked back with angry eyes. They murmured, but were unintelligible. They walked among the police officers, who were watching them.
One of the officers approached the end of the pier.
-You can come down now, captain.
They tied up the boats and went ashore.
"I'm Corporal Major Alejandro Domínguez, Captain." The officer stood at attention and then extended his hand. Máximo saluted him.

-Thank you, corporal.
-Thank you, Captain. We wouldn't know how to control them, much less attack children, women, and the elderly.
- Could you guarantee that we'll be able to unload our goods safely? And, above all, spend a few hours in the city. We have business to attend to.
"The governor is here, Captain. We've already received news of what's been happening, and people have been coming here for the past two days. The governor is concerned about the unrest."
They say the doctor is a renowned expert who will come to cure them all...
-None of that, people always try to cling to superstitions.
They walked toward the town hall, where Governor Farías was waiting for them. To one side was a small, makeshift altar with flowers and the Virgin of Itatí. The corporal noticed that the image had caught his attention.
"Excuse me, Captain, but they also say that the resurrected woman is pregnant, and they say that the boy is a messiah..."
Mendoza's men laughed, but the captain wasn't amused. He didn't reply and they continued walking to the cart.
The governor received them in his office, which served as both his study and dining room, in an old mansion on the outskirts of town. Farías was a cousin, or something like that, of the man who had pursued and executed Ruiz. It was clear he envied his relative's political success in Buenos Aires. He had done his best to flatter him with letters and trips, but had achieved nothing more than this governorship, which he was sure wouldn't last long.
"It's good to see you again, Captain! Last time I saw you, you were still a cadet. And what can you tell me about your father, the general?"
-With his ailments of old age, Mr. Governor, but the climate of Madrid suits him well.
-Like anyone who isn't from around here. And your godfather, Colonel Las Heras?
-He died a few months ago...
"Damn it! I heard you're in bad shape. The government, as always, neglects the men who have done good for the country. Look at us," he said, gesturing around him. In the yard, there was a large brazier where two cows and a pig were roasting. The women were chopping vegetables and preparing mate, the children were running around the fire playing with the dogs, while the men watched over the roast, talked, and drank.

"The government doesn't send us any resources. We had to close the small hospital that was barely functioning with just one doctor and one nurse. That's why people have become so enthusiastic about Dr. Gonçalvez. We know where he comes from here; his family is very well-known. And you know, Captain, how rumors spread."
Yes, I know. And that's why I want you to help me stop them. I've even seen the altar.
The governor sat down behind the desk and offered some mate.
-Don't pay any attention to that, those superstitions disappear as quickly as they lived.
"But Governor, I'm concerned about the safety of my ship, and of course, protecting the doctor. I assured you he won't go ashore in the village under any circumstances."
"Captain, people would be satisfied with a few consultations and things would calm down. The doctor is just a man; they'll realize that and leave him alone after a few days."
-But he's also a good doctor, and perhaps they could convince him to stay, and you, if I may say so, would be useful in helping him obtain a second governorship.
Farías laughed.
“I see whose son and grandson he is, Captain. He doesn’t mince words, and I like that. But as you know, we’re direct here and don’t beat around the bush like the people from Buenos Aires, or the Europeans who are coming in without a care. Let me tell you, gossip spreads all sorts of things, and people don’t choose what they hear. There are people wanted for smuggling on board the ‘Juan Manuel,’ that’s what I’ve been told.” Farías threw up his hands as if he knew nothing about any of it. “Also, that he was protecting Ruiz, that’s what my friend told me. There’s a woman, too, who they say killed a man with a frying pan; they found his body buried recently. And the death of his son, which I deeply regret, was very strange. Not to mention the accident of the woman they call ‘the resurrected one.’”
And while we're on the subject, about the whores who came aboard with that evil Valverde, whom we could never catch because he always gets away with some legal trickery—he seems to be a lawyer as well as a pharmacist or doctor or whatever the hell he is. And the whores, Captain, they protect each other. One of them has been missed for a while, and

nobody's seen her around here. Don't take it the wrong way, it's just that a few of my friends still have their eye on her, what can you do!
The old man laughed. He put his mate gourd down on the desk and stood up to look out the window.
-Stay for the barbecue tonight, Captain. I'm treating you and your men.
"Corporal!" Mendoza called.
The officer came running from the yard.
-Go to the dock and ask that Márquez and the doctor come down.
-At your service.
Farías rubbed his hands together.
-We'll have a great evening, Captain. Good food, good wine, and lots of conversation.
He placed his hands on Mendoza's shoulders.
"Don't hold a grudge against me, my friend. And to show you my good feelings, I'll show you something."
He made him approach the door and put an arm around his shoulders, pointing to one of the women in the courtyard.
-Choose that one, my friend. You are a strong man....
He patted her chest as a demonstration of the most extreme friendship.
"He has good stamina..." he said.
"My daughter!" he called. "Come here!"
The girl ran up.
- Yes, Tata?

In the morning, he was woken by three policemen and two others he thought he remembered as farmhands. But it was like waking up after an operation, as he recalled what had happened when they'd sedated him with ether to remove a bullet when he was fifteen. That time it had been cattle rustlers at old Lamdrid's ranch, but now he couldn't even remember what had happened that night. Only when he saw the governor's daughter naked, face down in the middle of the bed, with Gonçalvez on the other side, did fragmented images of what might have happened to him appear, or rather, of what he had done and, why not, of what she had done to him. All three were naked and woke with a start, except for her. She turned her head toward the police officers, who, while grabbing the captain and the doctor, kept glancing at the girl's backside. She couldn't have been more

than fifteen or sixteen, or even younger. Who could be safe with girls like that, raised in the countryside with parents like hers, if he even had one? She got up, covered herself with the sheet, and left the room.
They were allowed to put on their trousers, but shirtless they were taken outside, where the ranch staff stopped what they were doing and began to laugh openly. Farías was waiting, seated at the table where two maids were bustling about, preparing mate and going back and forth with fried cakes. It must have been seven in the morning, judging by the sun on the trees.
- What a disgrace, my friend! To rape my poor daughter between two of them, and that's without even mentioning the behavior of their men.
Mendoza looked around. The five who had accompanied him were in the same state, half-dressed, their hands tied, while one or two of the women they had been with were weeping; the others had disappeared. Then he saw, next to a tree, a body lying on the ground, its legs twisted, its head broken and covered in blood. He recognized Márquez's jacket.
Farías anticipated the question.
"What surprises me most about the old man is that he seemed so polite. He got so drunk he didn't know what he was doing. That's how the police alerted me in the middle of the night, when I heard the shots. I suppose you, my friend, must not have heard anything, so excited were you, I imagine, or perhaps you had already fallen asleep from exhaustion."
Farías watched them, smoking a pipe that he barely took out to speak.
"Why did they kill him?" Mendoza asked, barefoot in the mud, his legs slightly spread because his hands had been tied over his groin, which he was trying to cover. He was all stained with semen and urine.
"Apparently, the old man liked men, or so I've been told. The alcohol gave him away, and he made advances, to put it mildly, toward several of the men on the ranch. A brawl broke out, and the women called the police. The old man defended himself; it seems he was half-crazy. He threatened them with his revolver, and well, that's how it went for him..."
The governor's daughter appeared, covered with a sheet. Farías saw her and scolded her.
- Get out of here, you shameless person! And get dressed, damn it!
The girl left again, without much hurry, dragging the sheet through the mud, while the men watched her.

"Do you realize, Captain? Men like you loosen the rules, and what awaits the country with this generation?"
"And what are you going to do, Mr. Governor?" asked Mendoza, determined to cover himself in pride since he could not get rid of the shame.
"With his entire record, Captain? And with the rape of a minor? I'd be acting in bad faith if I turned him over to the authorities. I'm a man too, and I understand our needs, but that doesn't authorize me, as a statesman, to turn a blind eye to such blatant violations of the law."
Mendoza wondered where the governor had gotten that legal vocabulary. Behind his folksy demeanor, he hid a scant, ill-conceived erudition.
"I'll let it go this time, Captain, out of respect for your family. I wouldn't want the newspapers to tarnish your name. You'll continue your journey to Brazil, and the doctor will help deliver that saint's child. And then he'll return to share his wisdom with us."
He looked at Gonçalvez, who still had his head down, his gaze fixed on the mud, as if searching for something. Perhaps the memory of what he had done that night, or of what he had been doing for a long time without understanding why: the buried patients and the abandoned family.
The governor approached Mendoza, his pipe tilted to one side. The smoke rose weak and subdued, but the aroma was a mixture of strong tobacco and burnt anise. He brought his face very close to the captain's and said:
"You'll continue your trip and take care of all those deals Márquez arranged with the locals before he got drunk. Lots of lucrative commitments, it seems, judging by all those slips of paper he filled out, which are right there next to his body."
Then Farías put a hand between Mendoza's legs and squeezed his testicles.
-He'll be back later, Captain. We'll be waiting faithfully for him to return with the bags full.
If there was any lust in his gesture, it was lost in the satisfied look with which he observed her. He felt like he owned everything, the men and women of the ranch, and even the province, probably.

*

There was no funeral for Engineer Emerindo Márquez. Mendoza and his men finished dressing in a room under the watchful eyes of the guards. The captain stared at the body by the tree, surrounded by flies swarming over the blood. He had been given the papers with the notes the old man had taken, containing information on various ports and cities in Misiones and Brazil, on private businesses and small industries, on cattle ranchers, and on some plantations. What had happened to the old man? He didn't believe Farías's version. He didn't think the engineer was incapable of getting drunk and behaving like any man in that state, but he couldn't believe that a mind like Márquez's, who just minutes before had meticulously arranged and recorded so many potential business deals in his constant concern for the ship and its captain, could be completely different less than an hour later. Another dead man, Mendoza thought, at his expense. He should warn his children in Europe; perhaps in the drawers of his cabin there was some information about the parentage of his son Walter, the architect, with whom he knew he corresponded from time to time, but he said nothing about the eldest, who had gotten involved in revolts and politics, and he disowned and even denied the third.

They were escorted to the dock, this time without ropes tying their hands. The neighbors watched them pass, whispering. When they boarded the boats, Corporal Domínguez got in too. Mendoza glared at him.

-It's an order from the governor, captain.

-To make sure he comes back, right?

The corporal, who was in civilian clothes and had his rifle slung over his shoulder, shrugged. He wasn't the kind of man who could intimidate or pressure him, and perhaps that was Farías's cunning, always surprising him with something new. Thin, not very tall, with arms only strong enough to hold the weapon and fire, legs strong only from walking and running so much in the Misiones mountains. Young, he couldn't have been more than twenty-five, with a sparse beard, straight brown hair that he wore longer than regulation. As he was, in civilian clothes, old khaki clothing, and with a thoughtful look, he could have been mistaken for a farmer or a student.

He had the farmer's submissiveness, the student's physique and mannerisms. But he carried a weapon that he undoubtedly knew how to use.
They returned in the same boats they had arrived in, rowing in absolute silence. The men were ashamed, but the captain was humiliated. And what did Dr. Gonçalvez feel? Perhaps failure as the only constant in his life.

The journey continued north. After the morning and midday work, Mendoza would shut himself away in his office and review Márquez's notes. The river was narrow in that area, and he distrusted the man he had put in place of the engineer. He was one of the two who had remained since leaving Buenos Aires. Aníbal Molina knew the ship since its refit, and Mendoza had no choice but to let him do his job. That didn't stop him from keeping a watchful eye on him and encouraging him to live up to his position. He was also the only one who had refused to go ashore. He wrote letters constantly; Mendoza knew this because every time they reached a port, he went himself or sent someone to the post office. He had never asked him who he was writing to. Almost everyone had someone on land who missed them. And those who didn't were alone. But only he, Mendoza, carried his burden of monsters on his back, in his own mansion that moved across the water.
The river was narrow, the banks close, the riverbed not too deep. Yet the “Juan Manuel” continued to perform as wonderfully as it always had. Its noble lineage wasn't evident in the latest luxury of its interior, nor even in the materials of its construction. The spirit of the two great, hard-headed men who had inspired it seemed to continue fueling its makeshift machinery and the stability of its structure. Created for the sea, it atoned for its sins on the river with the utmost dignity of which it was capable.
They arrived at Puerto Iguazú. Mendoza didn't disembark. From the deck, papers in hand, he checked and inspected the goods being loaded and unloaded. The port workers watched him, and every now and then someone in a suit came out of the offices and greeted him with a wave or some other informal greeting. Mendoza wasn't about to give in to his impulses again. He had kept silent longer than necessary. Corporal Domínguez watched him from his chair, where he ate and spent all his time, sometimes reading, sometimes gazing at the river or the shore. He was a curious young man;

his gaze was persistent and elusive like a soldier's, but his gestures were still those of an adolescent, perhaps excessively curious. He wasn't drawn, however, to card games with the crew or to drinking. He slept little. They would see him late into the night in his chair on deck, smoking, and in the morning they would find him in the same spot. He prepared his own meals. Natacha had grown somewhat attached to him; perhaps he reminded her of Ariel in a way. She would bring him the books he was reading, and they would sit for a few hours in the afternoon, talking about the book, perhaps. But she couldn't get much conversation out of him. Soon they would fall silent, and then he would leave, making the excuse that he had to look after the sick woman. Domínguez would barely get up to say goodbye, and would watch her go, talking to herself. The first time, the corporal looked around. Later, he saw the shadow that turned to smoke, that turned to a dull glimmer, that turned to ash as evening fell.

The doctor and Natacha were alone in Altea's cabin. They had agreed to speak only when absolutely necessary, and believed they could manage with glances. Altea moved her hands and feet, her lips moved, and her throat desperately tried to utter something. Altea was lucid, they knew, and her body had recovered. Even her intelligence must have remained almost intact, though they didn't know if she retained all of her memories. Was she still herself, in that case—that is, the woman the others had known? Only the captain could confirm that, and as for her brother-in-law, they didn't fully understand the nature of their past relationship.
Gonçalvez decided to talk to him.
-Madam, now that you are feeling better, we must perform the cesarean section.
She was blind, but he knew she saw something. He couldn't explain how, but it was evident from the way she turned her head and the ease with which she sometimes raised an arm and grasped the hand of whoever was nearby. Gonçalvez felt Altea's warm breath and the perfume Carmen applied to her neck after washing her. She raised an arm and placed her palm against the doctor's cheek. Natacha stood up from the chair; Gonçalvez remained still.
-Altea, my dear, if you don't mind, I'm going to ask you to do something. I want you to touch the finger on my hand that I indicate. I will keep my

hand in front of you, but you mustn't touch it, just barely touch the tip of the finger I mention.
She nodded.
- Which is my ring finger, Altea?
She touched the indicated finger.
-Now, the thumb. - Gonçalvez switched hands.
Altea played the correct one.
"Now the index finger of my right hand." Gonçalvez placed both hands in front of her, but reversed.
Altea touched the correct finger.
Natacha sat back down, staring into the corner behind the bed. She was smiling, perhaps.
The doctor stood up and said to Natasha:
-This afternoon at six, ma'am. Altea must remain in complete fasting.
He sent Carmen in and gave her instructions on how to prepare the patient's hygiene.
It was still very early, and he wanted to be done with it all once and for all. He was tired from the journey, but above all, he dreaded the Brazilian border. The other shore seemed like a wall of eyes, silently watching him, accompanied only by the roar of the water, which grew louder as they approached the falls. The noise increased as the morning wore on. He had noticed Mendoza was more restless than usual. He paced the deck, checking that everything was securely fastened, urging the men not to neglect anything. On the forecastle, he sometimes took the helm, or he would stay behind Molina, watching him or challenging him whenever he thought he saw him make a mistake. At midday, he went below to check the engines and boilers. He gave the same instructions again, and the men set to work diligently, because they could hear the roar of the water cascading several kilometers upstream.
Everyone knew the falls were a beautiful sight to behold from afar, but for those in the water, they were more dangerous than a storm at sea. They knew what to expect from a storm, but not from the whirlpools that formed around the enormous masses of water cascading from such heights. The currents shifted in an instant, becoming far too powerful. And the surface of the riverbed changed just as dramatically, sometimes as deep as abyssal pits, other times covered with mud and drifting logs.

Gonçalvez spent the afternoon in his cabin, smoking in bed. He heard Valverde call him twice, but ignored him. At half past five, he grabbed his briefcase and went out. He saw the corporal in his usual chair; he looked pale. The ship's rocking was still intense for this boy who had grown up by the river. He smoked to control his anxiety, and above all, his nausea.
He entered Altea's cabin. Carmen was folding sheets on a table she had set up near the bed. On it were also compresses she had made with cotton and gauze. She greeted him very seriously. She was playing her role as a nurse perfectly. If her fate had been different, he thought, what a good nurse she would have been, and how different her life would have been…but then it wouldn't be her fate, but someone else's.
Valverde came in right behind him.
"Madam, please, only Carmen should stay," she told Natacha.
She looked at him with wounded pride.
"Could it be...?" she said, nervously wringing her hands. "I've seen many things, sir..."
"That's not why, ma'am, it's for the protection of the mother and child. The fewer people there are, the lower the chance of infection."
Natacha left without forgetting to knock on the door.
Then they got to work. Gonçalvez took the mask and soaked it with ether. He placed it over Altea's face. Valverde monitored her pulse, which slowly slowed until it stabilized. Altea was breathing normally. They lifted one arm, and she fell heavily onto the bed. While Carmen handed them the sheets, they arranged them around and over Altea, leaving her abdomen uncovered. They washed their hands. They rubbed iodine on her skin.
On the table, Valverde had arranged the surgical instruments. Some belonged to the doctor, but the rest were his. He had stolen them from hospitals or bought them from surgeons who no longer practiced because they couldn't or weren't allowed to. And the hand surgery kit, the one he guarded jealously for his dissections because he had taken it from the wardrobe of old Dr. Amadeo Ibáñez of Buenos Aires the day he saw him die in his San Telmo apartment, was there. And as he passed the scalpel over Gonçalvez, he remembered the old doctor's words as he deliriously lay there. "Take me to the hospital, Juan... Let them use my body, I donate it to them." Valverde had promised him that. When he died, old Ibáñez's body was almost consumed by cancer. His bones were like rotten stalks, and his

viscera resembled bags of excrement. That was what he saw when he opened him up that afternoon, without leaving the house until the next day, when he notified the children. The doctor had lived alone since retiring from Rivadavia Hospital when it was still located on Esmeralda Street. Valverde was alone at the morgue throughout the wake. Only one of his sons arrived, after they had already reached the cemetery. “Forgive me, Doctor,” he said to Valverde, whom he knew only from the telegram he had sent. There was clearly no good relationship between father and sons, nor was there an inheritance. The only inheritance consisted of debts. The son didn't ask to open the coffin to say goodbye; Valverde told him that cancer had taken its toll. The house was sold, but it had to be thoroughly cleaned out first. Some debts were paid off, not many, with a portion of the proceeds. The rest went unclaimed, so Valverde put it in an envelope and placed it in his jacket pocket.

Altea bled as the scalpel cut her. Valverde dried her with compresses, Carmen replacing them or disposing of the soiled ones. Gonçalvez made the incision carefully and quickly. He must have made many in his days as a village doctor. And probably without anesthesia. He kept asking for one instrument after another, and Valverde, who had done all that and much more, but only on corpses, couldn't help but admire Gonçalvez's skill. That must have been how young Amadeo Ibáñez worked in his time at the Rivadavia Hospital, when the practices of the old women's hospital still prevailed.

Births, cesarean sections, abortions.

Deformed children. Dead fetuses.

Dying women. Screams like cries from hell.

Dark silence of interrupted breaths.

Smell of filth, of fetid secretions, of gangrene.

And from time to time the vital cry of a rosy-cheeked boy and the sniffles of a weary mother.

He handed her the retractors, and she helped while Gonçalvez's hands inserted the scissors and separated the tissues. The scalpel cut through the thick muscle of the uterine wall again.

Altea was bleeding and they were putting on compresses. Carmen couldn't keep up with giving them clean ones and throwing away the soaked ones. The men looked at each other for a moment.

Then Gonçalvez put his left hand through the opening and touched the inside. There was a sound, but it was the noise of the falls, growing ever louder.
The ship's movement didn't help. The bed tilted slightly, and blood spilled onto it.
And the child floated inside as if in a jar of formaldehyde.
Then, a high-pitched scream was heard, so high that it was a barely audible squeal at first, and then it became so shrill that it hid the sound of the water.
The boy was in Gonçalvez's hands, thrashing and crying. Dirty and smelly.
Carmen watched and cried, and they had to shout at her to get her to react and help them deliver the baby while Gonçalvez cut the umbilical cord. He removed the placenta and began to suture.
There was no new blood left.
Was Altea breathing? Valverde checked her pulse. It was weak.
Gonçalvez finished suturing and covered the wound with gauze and bandages.
Carmen was taking care of the child, washing him and gently patting his back to help him breathe. He was a thin, underweight boy. Gonçalvez approached to listen to his heart.
-He seems completely healthy…
"Thank you, doctor," said Carmen.
-We still don't know if there will be a sequel. See if the mother has milk to give it; if not, we'll have to get some from the goats we have on board.
Valverde checked Altea's vital signs. She was still asleep from the effects of the ether. Her pulse and blood pressure were very low.
Gonçalvez examined her.
- What do you think, my friend?
"We have to wait. What we did is what we expected. The rest is a gift, it seems to me."
There was a knock at the door.
-Let me in, please.
It was Iribarne's voice.
-I want to see the boy.
-None of that, sir. We have to wait a few hours. Please be so kind as to wait.

"You think you own life and death, don't you? You decide who lives and who dies. I'm fed up with all of you quacks."
-If he doesn't calm down, he'll have even less right to enter.
They heard murmurs behind the door, and then knocks on the walls. They knew it must be around nine o'clock at night. The cabin was lit by three lamps and seemed absurdly illuminated by a nocturnal sun. They guessed, however, that outside it was dark and cold. The ship was still shaking regularly, and the roar of the falls was steady and constant. The captain had told them that passage through that area should be slow unless it caused a shipwreck, and that it would take them at least two days to get out of the area of dangerous currents. The Argentine side of the falls wasn't the most dangerous; that was the Brazilian side, which they were now entering.
Then they heard shouts coming from the passageway and perhaps from the deck. After that, they heard them coming from the hull of the ship. The skylight was sealed, so Valverde decided to go outside to see what was happening and calm the others. No sooner had he stepped outside than Gonçalvez locked it again. Valverde found Iribarne in the passageway being held up by three men, while Mara watched everything calmly, but sadly.
"What's wrong with her?" Valverde asked.
The captain was there, waiting like the others, for news about Altea and the boy.
"You should know," he said. "Doesn't it look like epilepsy to you?"
Valverde approached, but what Iribarne had was an attack of anger, or perhaps despair.
-None of that, the man is scared. And he's panicking.
"What for?" Mendoza asked.
"Can't you hear?" Mara said.
- Bats? - They always come around this time, every now and then.
- And they don't know why?
"Because that's how they are. They're from Brazil, they come and leave their young along the coast. More die colliding with the ship than they cause any damage. We're used to it by now."
José thrashed about and tried to hit those holding him. He managed to break free and started running toward the deck. Mara ran after him. The others followed, afraid the madman would jump into the river.

On deck, it was night, and there was neither moon nor stars. The complete darkness was pierced by the spray of the waterfalls, which, less than two hundred meters away, plunged down, creating a whirlpool larger than several whirlpools combined, and a roar that left them unable to speak except through gestures. The water soaked the deck with a torrential downpour that wasn't rain at all, but rather the vapor rising from the cascading water and condensing back into rain. José ran through the downpour. The bats, however, flew and fluttered despite everything. Mendoza knew it was very strange, but the bats were the least of his concerns at that moment. They had to protect the "Juan Manuel."
They heard a gunshot and the flash in the darkness. Corporal Domínguez had fired, and they saw Iribarne fall to the ground. Bats began to land on top of him as he thrashed desperately, trying to scare them away. He couldn't move because of his leg injury, but he was shouting and cursing. He was uttering incoherent things, things they understood only as a desperate delirium whose cause they didn't know.
They heard him shout his brother's name, and sometimes he pointed up at a bat flying slowly. They heard him call for the boy, the newborn. He shouted obscenities, swore to kill, and then wept with a pitiful wail. Despite the noise of the water, the flapping of wings and the man's voice were clear, as if they heard them on another plane of reality. As if reality had divided itself among all their senses to perceive it more clearly.
They gathered around Iribarne. Mara was comforting him, kneeling beside him. Valverde was tending to his wound. The captain and the others waited.
"I'm sorry, Captain. But it was the only way..." said the corporal.
Mendoza put a hand on his shoulder.
"He did the right thing, Corporal." But something told him that perhaps it would have been better if the world had simply taken its course without him intervening.

Gonçalvez spent the entire night in the cabin until he was certain the boy and his mother would survive. He sent Carmen to rest, and Natacha found the room dirty, but on the bed were Natacha herself, neatly changed into dry, white clothes, and the baby beside her. Her weaker arm was cradling the baby to keep him from falling off the bed. Natacha glanced at the

doctor, tired and with dark circles under his eyes, but she didn't have the courage to reproach him again for having sent her away. She smiled at him, just a little, and immediately set about tidying up. She took out the bags of bloodstained cloths, arranged the surgical kits, cleaned them, and placed them to one side so the doctor would find them ready whenever he needed them. It took her all afternoon, but not once did she look at Altea. She knew he was watching her, even with those blind eyes he now boasted of as a mask more effective than all the irony or naiveté with which he had fought her since the day they met. Blindness was a weapon she didn't understand, because it was a dark space that radiated light. No science she had read could explain it, not even those that studied the supernatural. Ariel wasn't a ghost: he was an energy, as intense as all the water that fell year after year into the same river. He was even more: a condensed energy that formed an image anyone could see, but which was nevertheless connected only to the will. The will was an engine calibrated to the same coordinates as that energy that was Ariel, with that entity that could only be revealed under certain conditions. The extreme cold? Perhaps the frozen helium around him formed the contours of her son. She had read all of that, but why did she want others to see it? Since he belonged to everyone, they had killed him. Since he was exclusively hers, he would continue to live.
Gonçalvez stepped out onto the deck and into the passageway. The men cheered him, except for those who had disembarked in Misiones and knew what awaited him. He stopped suddenly to gaze at the falls. It was mid-morning, the river rain still soaking the entire ship, and some men wore raincoats, while others were shirtless because they had no dry clothes left. The mountain of water rose no more than two hundred meters, stretching from east to west and from north to south. It was impossible to distinguish its beginning or end; the water vapor was so thick that it formed clouds several meters high, even towering above the ship. The roar was equally intense, so no one spoke, and they carried out their tasks amidst the deafening silence. There were remains of dead bats on the deck; he had been told about the previous night.
Something bad was happening, and it coincided with the ever-decreasing distance from Brazil. There lay his sorrow, in the north, and looking south, he found a cemetery.
- What are you thinking about, Estanislao?

He looked at Valverde, covered with a rubber raincoat and a hood over his head. He was bringing him another raincoat just like it. He put it on, because he didn't feel like arguing. They stood leaning on the railing, gazing in rapture at the landscape, which, more than pleasurable, frightened them. But sometimes it was nice to contemplate it head-on, from a distance.

"I won't return," said Gonçalvez.

- Where to? To Posadas?

-Nowhere.

- And where are you going to go, my friend? Look, I...

There was no time for anything. Gonçalvez had jumped overboard, and Valverde barely managed to grab him by the hand. The water was fighting to untie the knot in his hands, and he couldn't even shout for help because no one would hear him.

- Don't let go, don't go!

Gonçalvez looked up at him, dangling from the gunwale, his hand utterly limp, gripped by Valverde's as if it were a claw. And Gonçalvez probably thought of the scalpel he kept in his pocket. He'd grabbed it, he didn't quite know why; he abhorred those romanticized, melodramatic deaths. He certainly wouldn't slit his wrists, even if he'd had the chance. But chance is often portrayed as a scrawny old woman who runs fast and has only one hair. There was the river, so close and so effective.

But Valverde had intervened, and he saw the despair in that cynical man. Despair was not like him. He had shed his theatrical mask and was showing himself as he truly was, perhaps: an absurd fellow, a pathetic fellow who strove to be what he wasn't and to seek in others what abounded in the depths of his soul. The blood and bones of that sadness that now hung on the edge of the abyss. The deep waters where they say the bones of God lie, with which demons build cities.

"Don't go!" Valverde said, his brow furrowed in pain and his face tearful like that of a boy whose father is dying.

And Valverde felt the sting of the scalpel on the back of his hand. He let go. He had to let go because his flesh was like everyone else's. A substance so fragile it cried out just as much from a dagger as from a caress. The stupid flesh that defends us from the world, and takes it away from us. The flesh we cover with perfumes and that returns carrion to us.

The body is a betrayal.

11

Natacha sat, as usual, in the rocking chair to Altea's right, like the good thief beside Christ. Her gaze was proud, but not shifty or indifferent as it so often was. She rejoiced over something more than the sick woman's recovery.

Mara was on the other side, sitting upright in a cracked wooden chair, a grim expression on her face. She stared intently at Altea, studying the movements of her hands, the slightest twitches of her facial muscles, of what little remained of her: her right eye open, but with the eyelid half-drooping, completely blind, her mouth twisted in a grimace of pain, her brow furrowed, her hair white.

Natacha, who had read so much, couldn't stop making associations in the jumble of knowledge and memories swirling in her troubled mind. She looked at the others and at herself in the dimly lit room, because the doctor had said that all kinds of stimuli that might disturb Altea and the child should be avoided. The image of the three witches in Shakespeare's Macbeth came to Natacha.

They were, in a way, in a secret meeting to determine the future of the men waiting outside that cave-like room, but above all, the future of the newborn boy.

Behind the bed was Ariel. His image had never been so clear, and sometimes she thought Mara could see him too, and she knew, for some time now, that Altea sensed him behind her, because she was trembling.

For Natacha, her son had been the one who brought about the recovery. She had often wondered why. And after so many other reflections, pondering and pondering, questioning Ariel's face in the shadows, she

knew that, like everyone on that ship, he had brought about the birth as if so much depended on it. Was the newborn a kind of new Messiah? Perhaps it was too much to assign him such a role, but he had certainly come to change the course of many things. People who had died, others who continued to suffer. And Paradise? Where were the reward and Paradise? Paradise could also be an empty, deserted, and frozen wasteland, where absolutely nothing grows and the wind is a terrible reminder of God.
"It's a miracle, isn't it?" he said, looking at Mara. Simply put, he didn't believe in miracles as capricious excuses of ignorance, but as extraordinary processes of nature.
"Do you think so?" Mara replied. "I think it was the doctor and Valverde who did it, and they're not gods."
Natacha was happy; she enjoyed irritating her interlocutor.
-Maybe they're demons, especially that Valverde one...
"I would agree with that, ma'am, if I believed in some kind of religion. But I think he's a man like any other, and better than many."
- Are you referring to his quick wit?
"Because of their intelligence, I say. Intelligence is everything. Some of us have a lot of power over men, but they escape into other worlds we can't understand, and that's why we underestimate them. Their intelligence creates worlds and concepts in which they are happy, even though they suffer. Ours is a sentimental intelligence that prevents us from escaping reality. We act and judge, and we say things as they are, not as they should be."
"Wouldn't that be a waste of time?" Natacha said.
"I'm glad we agree on that, but sometimes I'd like to know what this 'wasting time' thing really means. It means surrendering not to irrationality, but to the imaginative engineering that so attracts them, not by making them lose their minds, but by establishing the structure of their minds in those conceptual buildings as beautiful as sandcastles."
-But sandcastles are very easy to destroy.
"And ours, ma'am? They're as indestructible as prisons built with a material more imperishable than rock."
-She looks sad.
-And I see her rejoicing.

"Isn't there a reason?" Natacha said, glancing at Altea, who was undoubtedly listening.
-I would say the child is the joy. She must die.
Natacha stared at her in astonishment. What surprised her was the lack of scruples in her sincerity, or perhaps the lack of education that she overlooked, using it more as a defense than a mask.
- Are you stating this as a judgment, or is it a prediction based on his condition?
"Whatever you want, it's all the same in the end. Like many, she's already fulfilled her purpose in this life. The rest is a very unfortunate gift, because it doesn't allow her to exist in another plane of reality."
"And what are those plans?" Natacha asked, looking at Ariel.
"Everyone, ma'am. Does what we see exist, or does it exist because we see it? Dreams are a beautiful home to live in, even nightmares are storms that fill us with ecstasy while they last. In contrast, the nightmares of the world are so long that they are utterly exhausting. Your religion, for example, to which I see you so attached, isn't it a beautiful imagery in which true believers live as in a utopian country where after the storm always comes a sunny morning? Flooded fields, destroyed houses, dead people: all that is the price for one more day. What intelligence is more perceptive than that of this God?"
Natacha stood up and bowed before Altea. She touched the silver cross and said:
"Do you see this cross, Mara? It has no more power than we give it, but it's a symbol. And symbols take on forms that our imagination never even conceived of."
Mara grabbed a lamp from the table, where stains from the operation still lingered. The shadows in the cabin shifted rapidly as she approached Altea. She glimpsed Ariel's outline as she scurried away in fear. When she reached Altea, she jumped and frowned even more.
- It's a cross made by the Indians, isn't it? I recognize the craftsmanship after all these years.
Natacha wondered where this woman got so much knowledge if she was nothing more than a smuggler and former prostitute. And her language, so refined, so increasingly less vulgar. It was clear she hadn't always been like this. They'd told her she was an alcoholic and a prostitute. But did that

contradict the knowledge she'd acquired in the school of the night? In the darkness, one reads many things that others, mere daytime beings, remain ignorant of. And ignorance is a shield of stubborn thorns.
He sat down again, watching Mara study the cross. He held the lamp in front of Altea's face, knowing it disturbed her. He saw her staring at the empty socket of her left eye. Mara's gaze was fixed on that hollow, while in her hand she held the cross.
“That cross, my dear,” Natacha began, “is a symbol, and like all symbols, it can have many meanings. Each civilization assigns something different to them and draws them with variations. But like in music, the central theme persists. The cross is death, but it is also life through resurrection. If you look closely, if you shorten the base of the cross a little until all four arms are equal, you can join the ends. Will you get a rhombus? No. Rhombuses aren't all the same. But you will have a circle. You might say that not all circles are the same. Not in the measure of their diameter, although they are in their shape. But I beg you to follow my reasoning. However much one circle may be larger than another, in all of them the diameter reaches a constant but imprecise number. There remains a margin that mathematicians cannot determine. It is said to be infinite. Perhaps it is. And what is infinity? Death? Most likely. God, or the imagination of a poet compared to the calculations of a geometer?”
Carmen came in with the food for Altea, and with her came the shouts and laughter of the men celebrating on deck. That night reminded her of the night of the shooting, but it was like any other when the men celebrated and drank. This time it was the birth of the boy, who didn't yet have a name. All of this was in honor and memory above all of Gonçalvez, and Mara knew that Valverde must be keeping his distance. She had seen him cry for the first time since she had met him, that day by the falls, clinging to the railing, beating his head with his fists. Those who heard the shouts could do nothing. The river was a *maelstrom* of whirlpools and strong currents. The doctor's body had disappeared as if swallowed by an underwater force.
"How are they behaving?" Natacha asked.
-As always. Let them have some fun…
- And the captain?

"With them, even though he forbade them from carrying weapons this time. But someone's probably got stabbed, but they all like each other, even though they fight when they're drunk. The captain's happy, no doubt. He asked me if he could come and meet the boy."
Natacha was startled. Again, interest in Altea, and this time it wasn't out of remorse. What fate awaited the man she was married to? He fell in love with mothers whose children weren't his, and loved them as if they were his own.
Mara realized. She had sat down again, and she was thinking, no doubt, about what she had seen in the hollow of her eye. So many things, she told herself. A universe anchored at the bottom of her orbit. And there, almost impenetrable, was the hole in the bone where a fracture had occurred. The bullet was somewhere, it didn't matter where. It was simply the touchstone for the formation of an opening. And this opening wasn't even important in itself, but rather the place it allowed access to. The walls of the orbit were only bone, and emptiness physically reigned between them. They were, however, a screen onto which the images arriving from the crack formed by the fracture were projected.
Carmen left after waiting a while for conversation, but those women were impenetrable. Natacha was feeding Altea, but she no longer brought the spoon or fork to her mouth; instead, she guided Altea's hand and arm to her mouth. She slurped and swallowed eagerly, but soon made an inarticulate noise and turned her head toward the boy, who had begun to cry—not a whimper, but a slow, mature cry.
Natacha placed the plate on the tray and carried it to the table. Altea had already picked up the child and was breastfeeding him.
"Tell me, Natacha, you who have read so much," Mara said. "What is the name of the bone at the back of the eye?"
-Sphenoid, and it's like a bird with its wings spread.
- And what function does it have?
"It's a bone, nothing more. It's part of the skeleton; it supports us, it builds us up, you know, my dear. If you saw it in anatomy books, you'd appreciate how beautiful it is. It has an opening that looks like an eye, through which the nerves and blood vessels pass."
Mara was left thinking.
- But it's narrow, isn't it? And it lets very little through.

-The things we see, Mara.
-And if it opened up a little more, would we see other things?
-Surely, but we would already be different from the rest.
-Like Altea, isn't that right?
Natacha guessed what she meant. She knew a lot because she had read, and she saw Ariel simply because he wanted to, or perhaps because he couldn't help it. She had wondered about the reason for Ariel's presence. Did he miss her hand, perhaps? Is body and soul a more intense symbiosis than any religion has ever imagined? An incomplete spirit of a body might not even be a spirit, and not even a body, but a fragment of a corpse. Natacha saw a lot because she knew a lot, but the rest was as inaccessible to her as Aunt Clotilde's understanding of the image of Our Lady of Sorrows was. Understanding is one thing, comprehension another. To comprehend, one must be that which is the object of one's obsession. Nevertheless, she sensed a prescience in Mara.
"Have you ever wondered, Mara, why a man injures himself, and what happens as a result? A scar is the mark of a door that has opened and closed. Something has entered or left, and there's no going back. There are others, however, that never close. The Indians say, according to the Jesuits, that when they perform trepanations they let the demons escape, but how do they prevent others from entering?"
Natacha was smiling, deep in thought, a thought she usually had only for herself. Lately, though, she sometimes murmured to Ariel.
"Sorcerers performed trepanations, and I believe they still do, to heal. But how did they learn to do them, and how did they know it would work? Did they perform dissections and experiments? I don't think so. That's typical of scientists: if they don't see or verify something, they don't believe it. Sorcerers speak with the gods, they say, but who's to stop us from thinking they speak with the dead, even if they don't know it? There are very ancient legends about this in all civilizations. Especially in the Norse and Celtic sagas. The Saxons and Scandinavians talk a lot about all of this. The Northern Lights may be masses of energy from millions of souls seeking bodies. The transmigration of souls into animal bodies. Do you believe that animals don't have souls, that they are only sentient and present consciousness, or that their learning is merely a set of reflexes in a rudimentary nervous system? The dead are here, and they tell us things,

and sometimes they reveal others to us." You, my dear, are one of those, I think.
Max was in the room, and he stayed under the bed when someone else was there. But on the rare occasions when Altea was alone, he would sit with his paws on the bed and lick her face. Mara heard the dog whimper and smiled.
"That must be why he doesn't like me," she said. "In my homeland, when I was a girl, the women would gather and tell stories about dogs as messengers tasked with guiding souls to death."
"And you are not death, like the old sorcerers I told you about. You are, in a way, messengers."
Mara stood up and pulled the boy away from Altea's grasp. Altea resisted, but she had no more strength. Her face contorted, and the hollow of her eye seemed to fill the rest of her face. It was a sensation that Mara experienced, allowing her to see more than she had anticipated.
Natacha thought to herself: She wants the boy, and she wants him for herself. A new Holy Family? Joseph, the adoptive father to many, but the true one—Altea had confessed this to her once, when they were both united by the same resentment against the captain. Mara, or Mary, the adoptive mother—or true mother? Because the virginity of the biblical Mary could very well have cast doubt on the biological plausibility as much as on the plausibility of that conception. Is God's seed so ethereal, or is it nothingness begetting everything? The spirit creating the flesh: its dwelling, its house, its home, and its destiny? From then on, the flesh determines the life of the one who created it. Without man, there is no God. That is why there are cemeteries, trees planted to build coffins, wrought iron to make shovels, land conquered to found cemeteries. To perpetuate life in a closed coffin: where there is a bone, there is the synthesis of everything. And the boy, a Jesus born into extraordinary, precarious, and tragic circumstances, was the center around which several destinies revolved, many of which would never come to pass. A child whose innocence would soon vanish. Yes, original sin exists, Natacha told herself, thinking of the boy.
An inverted Holy Family.

Mara held the boy in her arms, and suddenly she remembered the days she had held Elsa in the same way. The milk she had fed her, the woolen clothes she had covered her with, the only lullaby she knew with which she had lulled her to sleep. Elsa's face, so rosy and darkened, already weathered at that age by the sun of the countryside to which she had taken her before leaving for America. So many months she had rejected her, and such glory in saying goodbye. Perhaps that was what Mara loved, the longing for Elsa and not their life together. How could she raise her own brother's daughter at her own age? The pain would have turned to hatred, and the one she now loved might have been murdered in an act of tragedy worthy of an ancient poet. What else could incest bring, even if she didn't know that was its name? There are words that mean more than they are; humankind transforms them into stumbling blocks, things we flee from but that roll after us, haunting us, and from which we must protect ourselves by constantly looking to the sky lest they crush us. And looking up, we stumble below. Words like justice, for example, or words like love.
Looking into Altea's lost eye, she heard Elsa's babbling the day she said goodbye. The little girl in Roberto's arms and the sound of the ocean water rising to drown out the crying. But instead of moving forward, as she had hoped, the images regressed to her pregnancy. The endless months of her mother's recriminations, Roberto's irritation and contempt, the sermons of the village priest, the stares and insults of the neighbors. And then the witches appeared, the ones her mother had taken her to for an abortion. It's not the right time, they had told her, she's one of us. She hadn't understood anything, but there they were, emerging from the depths of the hollow, that whole room in the middle of the countryside. The oldest of them all, Sottocorno. The Italian witch who lived in Spain, exiled, they said, because in every town she resided in, after seven years, they drove her out with curses, threatening to burn her alive. They stoned her after stripping her naked, and that's what they had done the last time, even though the old woman was eighty-eight years old. However, that number dated back to the previous century when the old women who accompanied her spoke of her: the snakes around her legs, broken by the torture rack, the death-scented ointments she rubbed on to heal her burns. From Cádiz to Rome, from Florence to Strasbourg. Sometimes in London, sometimes in kyiv or Warsaw, or fleeing to Lapland when she was dangerously pursued. But she

always returned. How she traveled was a mystery. They saw her fly, transform into a large-winged black bird, or into several at once, her soul split into fragments that became flesh and bone. The skulls of the black birds contained her skull. Once, some man boasted of having killed one of them. He kept it at home, in a box. From time to time, he would take it out to look at the old woman's skull on Saturday nights. But by dawn, the bones had returned to their coffin. Sundays terrified her, the man said. But it was only a fragment of her that she had the misfortune to lose. Every cell in her body had the capacity to transform: every cell was a black bird flying over men, reminding them of the shadow of night and the iniquity of crime. She had married many times, always to the same man. She had mated with him to have many children, all exactly like her: men-women who changed sex at will. The faces of lies were the legacy her husband bestowed upon her with his semen. Some said his name was Ansaldi, but that was in Italy and other parts of the Mediterranean. Further north, they gave him vague, magician-like names. His profession, they said, was fiction, and his stage the theater of the world.

The old woman who held her pinned to the chair repeated like a mantra: She's one of us. And suddenly the roof of the house lifted up and the entire sky came rushing in, dazzling, upon them. The mother and the neighbors, and the rest of the witches who remained seated in a semicircle, like stones. Mara saw the birds carrying the rubble from the roof as if they were carrying the remains of a consecrated temple. And she went with the others, looking toward the interior of the house, where she herself was: Mara, the pregnant teenager, looking toward the sky, toward herself. And the old woman Sottocorno grabbed her arm and dragged her toward the walls that still stood. She tied her hands and feet to four embedded lockpicks.

The walls of the orbit cracked, like the old roof of a Spanish village. Cracks that opened, letting in no light but the gloom of memories, because memory is nothing more than a theater where, without fiction, there is nothing. The ship was cracking, and the deck had vanished. The night light filtered in, giving faint outlines to things: Altea and the bed, Natacha and the chair. The great smokestack out there, like a mountain so close to them, belching the black smoke of corpses thrown into the boiler. Many

faces watched from the edge, at the water's edge, stretching out hands to be rescued.
The entire ship was inside the hollow of Altea's lost eye.
It was an ancient world that was rising from the depths of the fracture.
Mara began to feel tugs in her arms and legs. The chains pulled at them millimeter by millimeter throughout the night.
It was not an ordeal, but a joy.
And that's why Mara started crying, hugging the boy. She had learned the power of chains, not by tightening them, but by opening them up. Her body unfolded, stretched, expanded, fragmented into countless possible shapes. She was the world, and she fit in the hollow of a broken bone.

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It was late when she returned to the cabin where José slept. The wound on his leg was almost healed, but he complained constantly of pain. She entered in the dark and lay down on the bed beside him. She touched drawing papers on the blanket; José was uncovered and naked. He was sweating, as he did every night, burning with fever, but in the morning it subsided and he was able to rest peacefully. Gonçalvez had ruled out an infection, and everyone already knew that withdrawal was causing these symptoms. He had become accustomed to opium after the beating Mara and the others had given him, and now he craved the drug because of the pain in his leg.
She lay down, knowing she could sleep. The drawing papers were in her way, so she threw them on the floor. José was asleep, and she was afraid of waking him and provoking his anger. It would only hurt him, she told herself, to become even more bitter over the ruining of those drawings he had grown accustomed to making during his time in bed. Even he didn't know where such skill had come from. She had been too busy thinking about Altea and the boy, and now that her identity, always hidden, often

denied, had been revealed within her own body, her mind revolved around other conflicts, perhaps on other planes of reality.
The black-winged birds, which he so often felt growing, invisible, on his back.
He heard José cough.
He thought about the bats that occasionally invaded the ship, and the terror they caused in that man to the point of wanting to kill himself.
Did they see something more with those eyes that everyone believed were blind?
Darkness is an inner light, it is the hollow of a well with limestone walls.
She stood up and sat on the edge of the bed. She lit a lamp and adjusted the flame to a very low setting. She gathered the papers, trying not to make too much noise. Then she saw the drawings José had been sketching. There were multiple sketches crossed out and others with overlapping attempts. José's were crude, and his drawings schematic and childish. She flipped through the pages of the notebooks, because there were so many. There were two on the bed, but under it and on the desk there were another five, and even in the latrine stall there was one more, dirty, but even stranger. Mara watched with growing astonishment how, in the speed of just a few days, José had acquired a superior technique, and his drawings were clear, without any trace of doubt in their execution.
And on all of them were depicted bird heads and bat heads. The bright, mouse-like eyes of the latter became tiny spider eyes in the center of a body from which sprouted long, thin legs that wouldn't fit on the paper, as well as the wings of the others. The drawings continued page after page, like pieces of a puzzle. In the notebook he found next to the latrine there was something different. They were anatomical diagrams of bones. Skulls and wing bones. And then he saw a human skull, right in the center, occupying both central spaces.
It was colored with a slightly pinkish ink, which perhaps was intended to be a deep red, but José had not managed to achieve it.
The only colored drawing on the sphenoid bone.
Mara recognized him without ever having seen him before.
And the bone had a break.
He raised his head, looking at the man tossing and turning in bed, his back broad and chest bristling, his legs strong and scarred. He moved,

tormented by the nightmares that never ceased, nightmares from which not even beatings had ever rescued him.
Now she knew that nothing could stop them because they came from something deeper than the mind. They came from the past and were renewed every night, which is why they would never die. Not even when the body died, because they were creatures that craved space. Wherever there was a hollow to take refuge, they settled, terrifying the flesh and clouding the blood, or breaking the bone.
In the morning, she was still awake, and she saw that Joseph was trying to get up in the light that came in through the porthole.
"Good morning," she said, leaning back in her chair with her arms crossed.
The man looked at her, with bleary and tired eyes.
- Bad night, wasn't it?
"Of the thousand whores," he replied.
-I saw you rummaging through the drawers.
"You son of a bitch!" José exploded. "Give me some of that damn stuff already! I got used to it because of you, and now I have this fucking pain I can't stand anymore."
"It was all to save you..." And as soon as he said it, he regretted having started his usual recriminations.
- Save me from what?
"From this," she said, showing him the drawings.
-Damn, I know where they come from, I just understand that I need to do them because otherwise they'll drive me crazy. When I finish, the headaches go away.
"But darling..." she said, taking his hand and trying to calm him down. "Can you imagine where all that imagination came from?"
"Nightmares, Mara. Every drawing is a dream, I swear. Every line I make is like an embodiment. But I'm afraid of them..."
- To the drawings?
-No, not that, because I know I get them out of my system. But when I realize that they're like drafts, like the sketches of an architect, an engineer, I don't know, and that later they'll become reality, like when they appear and flutter around and overwhelm me with the sound of their wings and the smell of shit.

José sat on the bed, clutching his legs to his chest and burying his head between his knees.
Like a fetus.
Like the boy who still has no name.
Mara went to get him opium, prepared it, and gave it to him to drink.
Are you feeling better?
José shook his head, but pointed to his arm.
-This will only last me ten minutes, I need…
-Okay, Valverde will be here in a little while, I'll let him know.
There was a knock at the door. He was surprised to see Natacha, who was carrying a large folder under her arm.
"Excuse me, Mara. I thought I'd bring this to Iribarne. I've heard he draws very well, and well… I think he'd appreciate some of what my son did. It's true I never encouraged him; it was something that kept him away from me. But now, my dear, I understand. He and I have reconciled since his death. It's… how can I explain it… as if what was and what was meant to be have finally come together."
-He's sleeping now, but come back later…
- In the afternoon, at five o'clock?
Mara wondered if she had been there before; that was the exact time he had his snack, and when Valverde came to give him his doses.
-Exactly, Natacha, it seems you already know. But I never saw you at those hours.
-Of course not, I've only been told, you'll understand, Mara, being such a perceptive woman.
Half an hour later, Valverde arrived. José was tossing and turning in bed, shouting and throwing things off the bedside table. The two of them restrained him while Valverde injected the vein in his right arm. Iribarne calmed down immediately, expressing his gratitude with a dazed look and a caress on Valverde's thigh.
- Can we get him out of this, Juan?
Valverde hesitated.
-My job is to put them in, not take them out, but I'll try.

The journey continued north. The Paraná River was a serpent of many faces, sometimes narrow as a canal, other times like immense lakes. The

twists and turns were endless, and the landscape along the banks varied from jungle to desert. Dunes, leafy trees, flowers of every color, and at night, the bats, which had changed their routine from sudden, large invasions to continuous visits, though in smaller numbers. None died; they simply circled at night, perching on the gunwales, on the masts, on the upper frames of the doors leading to the deck. Some even made it into the cabins, but Mara had taken the precaution of installing thick wire mosquito nets.

They passed through many ports, and in each one they carried out transactions that Mendoza personally oversaw, under the watchful eye of Corporal Domínguez. Now that Gonçalvez wasn't coming back, all that remained was the money to take to Farías, the only thing the governor was truly interested in. Domínguez's inquisitive observation perhaps revealed the corporal's true nature. His apparent submissiveness, his kindness, his condescension had ceased after the gunshot. Mendoza knew it, but he no longer cared. Perhaps he could salvage a good portion of the profits and get rid of the corporal. He was optimistic. Altea's recovery and the birth of the boy were the best things that had happened to him in a long time. If only she could love me again, he told himself, if only she could fully recover and be the woman she once was.

Valverde descended at each mountain pass and brought news to Mara. He had finally obtained the grass she needed.

"We'll cure Iribarne of that bad habit," he said.

At five o'clock one afternoon in June, he injected the preparation into José Iribarne's vein just before there was a knock at the door.

- Who is it?

-Natacha, my dear.

-Come back later...

-But it's important, Mara.

Finally, he opened the door and let her in.

"Am I being intrusive?" she asked, seeing Valverde with a syringe and José already agitated.

"That's right," Mara said. "What do you want?"

But she didn't wait for an answer when she saw José grab a new folder that Natacha was carrying under her arm. He opened it and looked alternately

at Natacha first, then at the papers, and began to speak toward the empty side of the bed:
-This is the one Manuel liked the most, isn't it?
And the anguish of doubt transformed into contentment at a statement that only he could see or hear. The conversation of this one man continued for several minutes. There were answers without questions, or questions without answers, or perhaps they were in the silence. Mara's ears grew accustomed to it, and she thought she heard a thin, soft voice, and even thought she saw a skinny, naked boy in bed.
José Iribarne laid the folder on the sheet and raised his hands. He held them in the air as if he were grasping something that resembled a face. He murmured, and kissed her.
"Is my brother okay?" he had said, and only the women heard him.
José smiled beatifically, perhaps infected by that other person he saw and spoke to.
Natacha wept silently, rubbing her hands together almost until they hurt. She spoke, without fear or concern for what others might think.
-Ariel has come to reconcile us all.

They spent the entire afternoon in José and Mara's cabin. They drank mate and ate fried cakes that Carmen hadn't cooked in a long time. Even the captain stopped by on his way to his evening visit to Altea, whom he talked to until almost midnight, expecting no response other than a nod or a handshake. He helped her during dinner, changed and cleaned the boy's diapers, and before leaving, tucked Altea in and gave her a kiss. There was no resentment, or it was so faint it could be avoided like an old, worn tree stump on a familiar path.
He stayed for fifteen minutes, listening to Valverde's anecdotes and Iribarne's ironic remarks. Natacha wasn't paying him any attention, but there wasn't as much hatred in her eyes anymore. Mara… what to think of that stranger whose gaze left him in a state of inertia? There was no defense against her. When he saw that she was about to speak, he said goodbye quickly. Altea was waiting for him, the boy was waiting for him, and Max, by the bed, kept watch until he arrived.

They had already eaten dinner and Natacha had left, along with whatever was with her. José was asleep.
"How many doses will she need?" Mara asked.
Valverde sat down in an old armchair in the corner of the cabin. He had drunk too much, and he was tired.
- What do I know? Several days. But today I don't know if that's really what calmed him down.
- Are you referring to the ghost of that crazy woman?
It didn't sound convincing; Juan was able to see what she was discovering in herself.
"It was the drugs, Juan, and that crap with the drawings. José's not well, he's bitter, you can tell. I don't know, his brother's story and all that."
Valverde shook his hands as if he didn't want to hear anything more.
"Don't explain it to me, don't give me that whole story, I already know it. Do you think I don't understand, that I don't know what's going through his head and body? Bats are here, aren't they? They live here and they have wings, so they can go wherever they want. Did Iribarne invent them? I don't think so. They were here and they'll continue to be here even after he dies. But they're symbols that become myths, and what I do believe is that myths have a basis in reality. Like witches, for example."
Valverde was drunk. He took off his shirt and wiped the sweat from his brow. He was scratching his crotch. Mara already knew him. She approached him and kissed him. It was time to find out something.
- Do you know, Juan, of any Italian families around here in Brazil?
Valverde looked at her; she was straddling him, her elbows resting on his shoulders. Mara was a beautiful woman, and she knew a lot. He'd been with her before, but never in front of the man she was with. She liked that, the thrill, the risk. She was the same Mara as before, when she hadn't yet absorbed all that otherworldly philosophy in the limbo of her mind.
He hugged her and kissed her fiercely. Mara let him, and asked, kissing his face and neck.
-If you don't answer me, it's because you know.
- And why do you want to know?
-Because I want to know more about myself...
- Or is it because you want the boy, and for that you need to get rid of the mother?

She continued kissing his chest and unbuttoned his pants. Valverde was a handsome man, and she didn't mind José waking up and seeing them. She missed José's sex. Suddenly, she had two men, like in the old days, and the captain, if only the remorse or fear that plagued him weren't so strong.
"In Aparecida do Taboado there are some... they say so many things... I crossed paths with them once... they have a large, very neglected property... but inside, they told me, they have ancient things... Come on, Mara, don't stop now." Valverde gazed toward the bed, where Iribarne slept the sleep of the just, probably for the first time without nightmares.
"What am I doing wrong, my friend?" he thought with his eyes closed, stroking Mara's hair. "She's still a whore despite all this philosophy. Witch and whore, my dear, and she's always been very good at what she does, you must know that. If she's as good a witch as she is a whore, we'll either be saved, my friend, or damned, depending on the whim of the incubus who presides over them all."
Mara looked at him, lost in thought. They were the ones she was looking for. She needed help against Altea, because she was stronger than before. Not her body, but the knowledge embedded in that broken bone of her skull. The void was what mattered, the emptiness was everything. Contradictions she couldn't grasp without them crumbling in her hands, or rather, in her newly sprouted wing-like hands.
She drank in Juan Valverde's essence, feeding on it as she had fed on so many others. She knew how to destroy a man, but she needed to know how to destroy a woman.

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He could have killed her any way he wanted. With a knife under her skirt, any of those afternoons when he went to look after her. Or poisoned her while bringing her food. Strangled her, seeing her weak arms. Smothered her with a pillow, in absolute silence. Or simply shot her. Mara wasn't

afraid of any of that, and she could have thought of many other ways if she had believed that was the right thing to do. But she didn't.
His death had to be natural, because it was necessary. And everything necessary is natural, because it is the only true thing.
The truth is natural, and what is natural is always necessary.
Events should not be forced; that would be imposing obstacles and distractions on the natural course of things.
Like the sky, for example, with its air currents that no one sees and yet direct the flight of birds and the falling of leaves from trees.
In the simple turning of a dry leaf there is an undeniable truth. And to interrupt the turning is to interrupt God.
Death plows its own furrow.
That night she got out of bed, leaving José snoring. One arm dangled off the bed, the other resting on the madwoman's son's sketchbook. They had made love half an hour earlier, and there was still semen on the sheet. Mara tore off one of the sheets and wiped it off. She threw the crumpled paper on the floor. She put on an almost new dress, one she had never worn because she had been saving it for an occasion that had never come. She looked at her hands; she had a broken nail that snagged on the fabric, but it wasn't important. She looked at herself in the dimly lit mirror. Behind her, her man slept, naked and peaceful thanks to the injection. She did everything for him, because thanks to him Mara had found what was buried in her soul, drowned by the liquor, and what had almost made her succumb if José Menéndez Iribarne hadn't appeared with the Indian on a bank of the Paraná River.
Now she had to rebuild a new world, with only a new dress and a broken fingernail. And with those two feminine traits, she hoped to convince Captain Mendoza.
He opened the door after two knocks so soft he probably wouldn't have heard them. Mendoza raised his head and looked toward the door, startled.
-You again…
Mara laughed.
-He did it on purpose… What does he want?
The captain placed his pen in the inkwell and wiped what he had written with blotting paper. Now that Márquez wasn't around to handle all the business paperwork, he had learned to do it better than he expected.

It was almost midnight. Mara came in and stood in front of the desk.
"Excuse me, Captain. But I must speak to you about something important. Altea has improved greatly, but now that we don't have a doctor, it would be a shame to halt her progress. She needs to regain her muscle mass, and I believe she might even regain her sight and speech. You've seen how hard she's trying to communicate."
Mendoza watched her from his chair, stroking the right side of his mustache. She realized he had noticed the new cream-colored, almost white, dress that accentuated Mara's tanned skin.
-Then it occurred to me that we should take her to the village…
- Which town?
-Aparecido do Taboado, a few kilometers to the north. I believe you have business there.
- And what for?
"There's an Italian scientist who lives with his wife in a large house. I've been told he's a brilliant mind, but he's getting old and has come to America to rest. But if we take him to Altea, I think he'll be interested in his case."
Mendoza took the pipe from a desk drawer, filled the bowl with strong tobacco, and lit it. He exhaled the first puff, and the smoke enveloped Mara's face.
- And what does he specialize in?
-That's the best thing, Captain, because I've been told he's a brain surgeon.
Mendoza stood up, walked around the desk, and stood in front of her. Now he was exhaling smoke almost directly into her face. Mara didn't move away; she liked the scent.
-And let me guess who told you about those people… Valverde, wasn't it?
Mara put on the expression of someone about to defend herself, but stopped and made a face like a scolded child.
-But Captain…
-None of that. I don't have time to take Altea and wait who knows how many days until that doctor, or whoever, does something for her. Besides, I don't trust Valverde.
- What if I tell you that it was Juan who prepared the medication that Dr. Gonçalvez administered to Altea?
-I wouldn't believe him…

"You're deceiving yourself, Captain. You cling to what little you have for fear of losing it. And you always end up losing what you love. And the worst part is, you don't even risk anything to keep it. You aim high, but you stumble and break everything in your path. What is this ship, if not a grand fable you invented to live inside?"

I expected him to be furious, but Captain Mendoza wasn't what he used to be, even if he wasn't much of a man. There was a glint in his eyes, and he tried to hide it behind the smoke from his pipe.

Mara placed a hand on one of the captain's cheeks, caressing it with her thumb, wiping away a tear that hadn't yet fallen. She touched his lips, and suddenly he parted them and paused her finger between them. Mara felt his tongue warming the tip of her finger.

Now he knew what he had always known: the strength was not in any one part of his body, but in every particle of his flesh.

He approached, and Mara felt that she didn't want to do it.

He kissed her, even though he refused to acknowledge what he was doing. He dropped the pipe on the floor and grabbed Mara by the waist, putting his hand under her skirt.

Mara opened Mendoza's shirt and kissed his chest. He was different from the others. His body was stronger, his hands less hesitant, his soul more fragile, his mind less twisted. More decisive, yet less thoughtful. But they were all the same when they embraced her.

They wanted what she alone was willing to give them.

He surrendered his body and received permission. That permission he believed he was granting, but it was the price to atone for his guilt, once again.

As she was about to leave, she glanced at Mendoza, who was smoking, sitting on the floor with his back against a desk leg. He was still naked, and Mara admired his body.

-She will see him as before, captain.

There was no malice or sarcasm, not even a hint of irony. Mara's face was a landscape of pure contemplation. To disconcert was her aim, and she achieved it with a mastery that seemed to have been honed over centuries.

He walked down the corridor, thinking of the captain cornered in his playroom, surrounded by his desk and papers, pretending to conduct adult business. Then he lay down next to Iribarne, who was clutching his

drawings in his sleep, like a boy ecstatic from being praised all day. And in the darkness, he remembered Valverde, who in his own cabin must be sleeping the sleep of knowledge and science in his barely dangerous laboratory of dull scalpels and broken test tubes.

*

They went down to Altea in a bunk tied with four ropes towards the boat. Mendoza watched, occasionally shouting a curse word at the carelessness of one of the men. He was nervous, remembering when he and Altea had walked arm in arm down the bridge to Lavalle.

Mara and José watched the process, slow and exasperating, because they had to be careful that the bunk didn't tip. They stood side by side, she clinging to his arm, almost supporting him because her leg still ached, but it was much better. He saw a meaningless smile on her face. Mara's eyes were fixed on the village instead of the woman they were lowering. During the night they had talked in the darkness, as they had during the months they spent on the fishing boat. Naked and staring at the darkness of the ceiling, they spoke as if they were talking to empty air, making sure their words would soon be swallowed by nothingness and that nothing would remain but the ridiculous feeling that there had once been a sound.

José pondered, touching with his left hand the silver cross that now adorned his neck. The one Manuel had worn for so long, and whose scent could almost be detected in the metal. Mara had made sure to get it from Altea and had given it to José that night. Little more needed to be said. That was all.

A cross was enough to make José put the drawings aside, swatting the folder away, and to make him refuse the night's dose. He had penetrated her as if he were a man who loved her.

That was all.

And more than enough.

Valverde would accompany them. He had the briefcase that had belonged to Gonçalvez. He had polished the cracked leather, sewn the small cloth pockets inside, and tidied up the jumble of instruments and small bottles. He thought of the hands that were no longer there, and of that hand he had tried to hold on against all odds by the waterfalls.

Now, however, the river was a quiet, rugged wasteland. For miles around, the riverbed had been widening very slowly, the waters flowed sluggishly, and the ship's engines were running at their lowest power. The banks were no longer jungle-covered but lined with palm trees, punctuated by large expanses of pristine white sand. Winter was approaching, but the weather was unusually warm. The sun was mid-morning and behind them. The town of Aparecida lay on the Brazilian side, and everyone watched the disembarkation process unfold to the northwest.

Along the border, every now and then, there were guard posts and small docks with gendarmes' boats. Mendoza thought he saw them watching him closely, but it was simply curiosity about the ship's size. The rumor of the "Juan Manuel," with all its legend, had surely reached these parts by now. Corporal Domínguez was very close to him, unarmed, because for some time now, the boy Ruiz had become attached to him and accompanied him everywhere, like a dog followed Bernardo. The corporal's gaze was kind, almost always, but it had the irritating effect of reminding him of the reason for his presence. He would have liked to disembark and enter the town, follow that contingent of strange people who were carrying Altea away like a procession. To leave everything, like a monk who cloisters himself to worship an endless rite of expiation and forgiveness? Perhaps. He wouldn't feel pain, surely. The best part of all this was abandonment. That was the word. The immense weariness of carrying the ship's cross on his back was forgotten because that cross was the shell in which he hid. Was that why his life had led him to be a river captain, rejecting his family's long maritime tradition? Open spaces, like this one on the wide river, unsettled him. Sometimes he liked to wander into places where twilight prevailed: his office on the ship surrounded by old furniture, Aurora Valverde's library, the small town and the sparse ranching of Lavalle surrounded by trees where he could hide. If as a boy and teenager he had loved horses on his godfather Las Heras's ranch, it was because they made him cross the fields swiftly, as if fleeing. The Santa Fe mansion

with its rooms and alcoves inside a large ranch house, like this ship that now protected him. And the women, dear God, he said to himself, rubbing his face with one hand and keeping the other behind his back, as if shielding himself from the sun that beat down on him from behind and yet blinded him. He realized what he hadn't wanted to see: as many women as caves, refuges, and darkness. Wombs with their walls like shields. Because in the end, what is a coffin if not a reservoir and protection for a body that has no defense but its utter defenselessness?

Once ashore, they loaded the litter onto a cart they rented from a small ranch that included a general store and a dilapidated stable. The town of Aparecida was ten kilometers further inland, the old caretaker told them.
"Do you know where the Ansaldi family lives?" Mara asked.
"Where they don't live, ma'am... all this is theirs, from the river way out there, who knows where..."
The old man pointed into the distance, waving his hand for a long time and whistling.
Valverde paid the rent, and the men who had carried the litter returned to the dock and said their goodbyes. They didn't expect to see Mrs. Altea again, though they had grown to worry about her and ask about her almost every day, even though they weren't allowed to visit her. They had come to sympathize with her bad luck and with the strange aura surrounding her that surrounded her. Besides, they didn't trust either Mara or Valverde. They both climbed onto the driver's seat of the cart and groomed the mule that was pulling it.
The countryside was deserted of people and houses. It was a wasteland of dry grass dotted with bushes and a few palm trees. It was the beginning of winter, but it was more damp than cold. Mosquitoes swarmed, lashing them in small groups for more than two hours. It was midday when they spotted a two-story house in the distance, surrounded by palm trees and a sea of tall weeds. The roofs grew increasingly reddish as they drew closer, and the white facade revealed its windows and its stains of dirt and mold. There was no fence, just a crumbling adobe gateway, still tall and split in half, its archway seemingly bearing an inscription judging by the fragments of letters drawn with bricks. Mara told Valverde to stop right underneath it.

"Do you want to break your head?" he asked.
- Can you read what it says?
Valverde looked up without letting go of the reins. He frowned at the sun, and after trying to decipher it, he laughed.
- What's happening?
"Nothing, Marita, just what we expected. It's Italian, like the owner, and from Dante. *'Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate.'* There's an *'l* ,' you see? The 'o,' and then *'esepe* ,' and finally *'entrate* ,' complete. What else could I say?"
"Is that for us or for her?" Mara asked.
-For everyone who comes in, my dear. If you're afraid, there's still time to come back.
- Me, scared, Juan? Don't you know me yet?
That's why I say, my dear, there's no place like coming home...
Mara looked at him as they resumed walking along the dirt road that led to the large house. Valverde was acting strangely, as if he were hearing something in the distance and trying to decipher the sound that she couldn't yet perceive.
And then she heard the barking, which grew louder from the rustling grass, but the sun's glare was staring directly in her eyes, and she saw nothing but shadows and flashes of light, until she put a hand to her forehead. She saw the short, stocky, white dogs running toward them. The mule stopped and began to bray, frightened. Valverde held her reins tightly, but she thrashed about and started running toward the house. To escape the dogs, she knew nothing but to keep going and run among them, as they had already surrounded the cart and were barking furiously. There were more than ten of them, all white, and then Mara saw that they had no ears, and instead of eyes, a simple opening in the skin that resembled a pair of closed eyelids.
The mule didn't stop until it was almost at the short staircase that led to the porch of the house. An old man had held it by the muzzle and was trying to calm it. A woman, as old as he was, was shouting:
"Get out, dogs, get out!" he yelled, chasing them with a branch in each hand. The dogs ran away and hid under the cart and the ladder. They seemed to want to protect themselves around the man, who laughed at the woman and her attempts.

- Just laugh, you fucking old man! You and the dogs drive me crazy.
She spoke with several accents, part Portuguese, part Italian, and Spanish came through naturally. She wrapped herself in an old, thick shawl embroidered with indecipherable patterns. She looked at the visitors with a serious expression, but didn't seem surprised.
"To what do we owe our honor?" asked the old man.
Valverde got out and extended his hand.
- Do I have the honor of greeting Gregorio Ansaldi?
The dogs had fallen silent because they had approached Valverde and were sniffing him. He watched them and let them be, and began to pet one of them.
The old man understood; his expression was clear and astute. The old woman approached the cart and said:
-Signora, please forgive my outbursts.
"Eco, signora," said the man. "We are two old people who are used to being alone."
"We're sorry to bother you," Mara said, getting downstairs and greeting the old woman.
-Nothing... you two are welcome, the chavs don't welcome just anyone like this.
The couple exchanged knowing glances that Mara and Juan thought they understood. Those dogs got along very well with Valverde, and she had taken to the old woman the moment she looked into her eyes.
-As you said, buddy, it's Gregorio Ansaldi, this is my moglie, Marietta.
"How can we help you?" she said, looking at the cart.
-Our friend, Altea, needs help.
The old woman turned around, her arms crossed, holding her shawl, and stopped in front of Altea, who was sitting down. She had been dressed in a black gown, and her head was covered with a hood.
"Take her inside the house," he said.
Valverde and Ansaldi carried her downstairs to a room on the ground floor. The main room was sparsely furnished, except for a large table, chairs, shelves with dishes and books, and a fireplace with a large fire burning. It was hot inside, and the dogs, which were about to go in, stopped. The women followed the men to the room, where they laid Altea on the bed.

"The signora will sleep here, and you on the upper floor, next to our room," said Marietta.
- But do you think you'll be able to help her?
-Don't be an idiot, my dear, that's why you came, right?
The old woman was undoubtedly her, the one she remembered from her childhood. The same age despite the years, the same tone of voice, though on this occasion she had heard it almost in a dream, because that was how she remembered her childhood and that entire day when her mother had taken her to the women's gathering. That old woman was a mixture, like her way of speaking, of times. In her gaunt face with eyes greener than a palm leaf, in her spindly body with sunken chest and sloping back, in the wide hips that could be glimpsed beneath the woolen dress she must have knitted herself, any incongruity was superfluous, because all the supposed incongruities combined to form a single thing and a truth, which was neither physical nor could be seen: it could only be heard in the timeless tone of her voice and perceived in the expression of her movements. She walked, yes, but as she climbed the front steps it was as if she had no bones, and as she moved through the hall and stoked the wood, the fire seemed to merge with her, illuminating her features and rejuvenating her. It was at that moment, when they returned to the hall and he saw her moving the embers with the hearth iron, that he asked:
Have we met before?
The old woman turned around, sat down in a chair that looked uncomfortable, but remained upright with her arms crossed, still clutching her shawl. Now the firelight shone from behind her, and her face remained in shadow. The men were still in the hallway, talking; they seemed to have much to discuss, perhaps about dogs, perhaps about science or magic, judging by Ansaldi's almost circus-like hand movements.
"Idiot," said the old woman. "They're behaving like an imbecile. I am Marietta Sottocorno, I won't forget, my dear. They told you my husband can cure the lady, but you didn't come for that, my dear. We'll see her together tomorrow. Men have things to talk about, other, more earthly and immediate interests."
She fell silent, and both remained quiet. It was mid-afternoon, but inside it was very dark except for the firelight. Mara stood facing Marietta, whose green eyes shone in the complete darkness. Mara looked at the walls,

plastered in some sections, bricked and studded with nails in others, but she saw only two pendulum clocks, both working. One showed three o'clock in the afternoon; the other had no hands. The ticking was clear and almost obscene in both, because they didn't coincide, but rather one followed the other, as if striking it, responding harshly, while the first one slipped away, timid and submissive, yet persistent. The clock without hands pursued it, mocking the other, which continued its duty to mark the exact time, nailed to the wall like a crucifix.

Suddenly, Ansaldi's voice appeared, like a master of ceremonies appearing in the middle of the deserted circus ring (the almost uninhabited hall), and announcing, rubbing his hands together with delight:

- What's cool, dear?

-The usual, love.

The old man laughed at the sarcasm.

"Bene," he said, looking at Valverde for complicity. "Come with me, my friend, we have much to discuss while we cook something. The ladies will set the table, won't they?"

Mara hurried to do it. She searched the cupboard for the dishes, napkins, and glasses. She went to the kitchen for the bread and cheese. She set the table with dedication and care, knowing that the old woman was watching her from her corner by the fire. The plates were Italian, the tablecloth French, the napkins embroidered with women's names, and the crystal glasses obscured their contents from afar. She had to approach and lift one to taste the wine that Ansaldi had served once they were already at the table, with the pasta in a large, steaming dish. The sauce had a strong aroma.

"I hope you like it," she said. "They're smoked meat ravioli, and a filetto to my liking, of course; Marietta leaves the decisions to me in the kitchen."

Mara smelled the aroma of basil, but it was such a strange blend of spices that she couldn't describe it. She tasted the pasta. The meat was tender, but it had a musty taste, like something burnt, perhaps? Or maybe it was the type of meat. She had tasted everything in the river, even rats. But this meat was somewhat sweet. Without putting down her fork, she glanced at Juan Valverde, who was smiling at Ansaldi's conversation. Then Mara had a thought so naturally precise that it fit perfectly in that room and at that table as if it had been constructed taking into account every element of

that night: the exact place of everything, every movement of the guests, every word and breath exhaled, the degree of heat produced by the fire, and above all, the precise combination of the ticking of the clocks.
At the exact point where all these elements converged, thought was born with the greatest naturalness.
And then Mara overheard the conversation of the men who were fighting against the abysmal silence of the women.
-My dear Valverde, the dog wants it.
One of the dogs sat by the chair, its eyes glazed over, sniffing the scent in the air. Valverde stroked it.
-As I was saying, my friend, they are the result of many experiments. Cosi tanti hannno fallito…
A brief pause that no one interrupted, only the animal with a moan.
-Tasty, isn't it true?
Marietta looked at her husband condescendingly, as if to say: what can you do, men and their egos…
The conversation continued, sometimes in silence, to the uneven ticking of the two clocks, which sounded loud and strident to Mara's ears, but which the others seemed not to hear. They also talked about village matters, about the people of the river. Mara wanted to know where they came from and when they had settled in that area. Neither of them answered her except with evasive answers: many years ago. They were from Italy, she from Sicily and he from Sardinia. They missed the sea, of course, but they had already traveled the world, and for a moment Mara thought she could glimpse in their vague statements that this would not be the place where they would die. How old was the old woman, how old was he? Their bodies were those of elderly people who could still take care of themselves, but listening to them, and even their voices, gave the impression of being much younger, or perhaps, timeless. When midnight arrived, she was certain that any time and place would be fine with them. They adapted to the place and its customs as if they didn't have bodies of their own with specific tastes and needs: neither heat nor cold, neither abundant nor scarce food, in a large or small house. The best indicator of these characteristics, which I couldn't define, were their voices, straightforward in tone, full of grammatical mannerisms, awkwardness, and a mixture of languages that only accentuated the ubiquity that identified them, a plurality that

converged in seemingly trivial and anecdotal discourse and then expanded and multiplied again a moment later.
They were elusive, like their shifty glances and their conversation, sometimes discursive, sometimes intimate, sometimes sententious. Whether angry or friendly, they didn't seem to listen because they already knew the answer.
Yes, Mara said to herself. They know why we've come, and they also know reasons that we don't know.
They went to bed in the room that had been assigned to them. Mara and Valverde undressed and lay down on the large bed, listening to the chirping of the crickets that filled the room. They didn't fall asleep until almost dawn. They caressed each other, tried to kiss, but the crickets were like guards in a prison. Every moment a warning call, and a sentence foretold at every turn.
The window was open, and the light of the almost full moon streamed in like a breath onto the floor beside the bed. Tomorrow would be a full moon. Valverde fell asleep thinking about the dogs, one of which had lain down on the rug next to him.
Mara dreamed she was Marietta Sottocorno. She ran along the rocky Sicilian coast, fleeing her mother's threatening calls, fleeing the dogs that wanted to hunt her down. Her dress was torn, her braids disheveled and tangled with weeds, dirty with earth and blood, because she had been digging in the earthy Sicilian plain. Her feet were bare, hard as stone. Her knees were scar upon scar, hardened into skin where she could barely feel anything. She ran, stumbled, and got up. Meters, kilometers, until she found the cave where she always took refuge, its entrance disappearing with the tide. That's why she loved the night, and the moon reflected on the water right at the edge of the cave ceiling: the water's reflections on the rock illuminated by the moon's indirect light.
The rock was the seabed, and the insects and vermin that roamed the stone were demons. How they work, they said, how industrious they are. They build cities underwater, and the bricks were long and chalky. They worked happily, sometimes in pain, other times very tired, but they moved as if all their ailments were nothing more than prizes and rewards for their effort. That's what they had learned from God: pain is an ecstasy that is in itself

both cost and reward. They raised cities and nations at the bottom of the sea with that precious material that never ran out.
They were bones, large and small. Hard and fragile. They fell from the moon every night. And they gazed upwards from the depths of the water, appreciating, as involuntary but ecstatic witnesses, the nakedness of God, who shed his skin and was shedding his bones, one by one, endlessly. A dying God, who never quite died because he had never fully been born.
Because the moon was her suicidal mother, who killed herself every month by going in and out of a cosmic madhouse.
Because he had no father to blame for his failure.

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In the morning they heard the shouts of the farmhands in the fields. Some were cutting the grass under the old woman's angry voice, others were preparing the mules and carts to take the bales of hay and cans of milk to sell in the surrounding villages. Ansaldi's voice gave orders without shouting, but it could be heard clearly from anywhere.
Mara and Valverde got up, yawning. They got dressed while the dog watched them and barked as if urging them to eat breakfast. It was already late in the morning. The animal listened to the barking of the others outside. It had no tail to wag, no ears, but it heard very well; it had no eyes, but it ran without bumping into anything or anyone. It raised its head to sniff the air, and that was more than enough for everything.
There was a knock at the door.
"Friend," said Ansaldi. "Get up, I'll be waiting for you on the field..."
-We're coming...
Mara asked him with her eyes.
-He's going to show me where he gives birth to dogs.
"Did you see how strange they are?" she said, fixing her hair in front of the wardrobe mirror.

-They are special. I believe they are superior to all the others.
They went to have breakfast outside, under the arcade. Marietta waited in a rocking chair with a mate in her hand, smiling in the shade. She greeted them without looking at them, because she was watching a cart leaving with sheepskins.
"Lots of business," Valverde said as he sat down. A girl no more than eleven or twelve years old was serving at the table.
The old woman nodded, and gave two warning shouts to the farmhand who was driving.
-Cover them up, man, damn it! Can't you see it's going to rain today?
Mara looked up at the clear sky.
"You can't trust these people," said the old woman, placing the mate gourd on the table. The girl prepared another gourd and asked in English what the gentlemen wanted for breakfast.
-I already told you not to speak in gringo.
The girl repeated the question in Spanish that sounded a bit like Catalan.
The old woman laughed.
"What can you do? There's everything here, and none of it's any good. They're like pieces of a dead, rotten world. Dry pieces that my husband and I collected from everywhere. One of us does one thing, another does another."
"They're gears," said Valverde, eating bread and cheese.
-That's right, you've said it very well. But they break and get stuck.
-However, this stay works very well, from what I can see.
Marietta gestured with her hand, more or less. Sometimes you have to take advantage of other jobs. Gregorio sells the dogs in Brazil, and at other borders. The Colombians pay very well.
- And what do they use them for?
The old woman raised her hands and rubbed them together.
"I don't know anything about that. I leave the science stuff to my husband. I'm into other things."
"What for?" Mara asked. She had opted for a mate, and the girl was staring at her, mesmerized.
"I have my clients, you can imagine, my dear. Three times a week, these ladies, all dolled up, come in to have their fortunes told. You have no idea

how anxious they are; they pay more than they do for dogs just for a prediction."
"Accurate?" Valverde asked ironically. But the old woman didn't like it.
- What do you think I am, darling?
Ansaldi appeared and took Valverde onto the field.

They walked the whole way to the sheds nestled in a grove of trees two kilometers from the house. There were three adobe buildings with tin roofs, connected by interior doors. They entered the middle one, and Ansaldi turned on the electric lights. Valverde found this technology strange in such an impoverished place, but then he saw the tables covered with mechanical devices, their pulleys and cables dangling from one table to another, sometimes reaching the floor or even the walls. There were shelves with drawers, each displaying a sample of its contents next to the handle: screws, nuts, nails, and anything else needed to build and assemble small electrical gadgets. Other shelves held pieces of wood and metal cut into different shapes, sizes, and thicknesses. There were jars containing fetuses and pieces of adult anatomy: hands, feet, heads, and even male genitalia that hadn't lost their erection.
Valverde stopped in front of one. Ansaldi understood.
-It's just a sample of what I do here.
-He seems to have accomplished a lot.
"It depends on its importance. If you judge by that," he said, pointing to the jar, "it's important, no doubt about it, but there are other things..."
- Like dogs?
"That's right, but I try to do too much, and so many scattered interests don't give me time to dedicate myself fully to any one of them. What I particularly like is electromechanics, which is why I brought you here, my friend. I need someone dedicated to biological science, and your reputation has reached even these parts."
"And what can I do with the dogs? The truth is, I'm fascinated by them..." she said, and then she heard barking from the left. The cages were in the shed next door.
They entered and Ansaldi turned on new lights.
-This is your answer, my dear. Look at those animals.

Valverde saw cages stacked several high along the length of the shed. There must have been at least fifty, and in each one was a dog exactly like the next. He walked past the cages, reading the labels in the careful, calligraphic, and old-fashioned handwriting that must surely have been Ansaldi's, indicating what must have been the animals' birth dates. The dogs all barked together when they entered and the lights came on. It was a din that barely allowed them to speak at first, but as Valverde walked among the cages, the dogs gradually quieted down.

Ansaldi had stayed behind, watching him.

-It's amazing, they don't even treat me this well.

Valverde calculated the dogs' ages: two years, three months, five years, fifteen years, twenty-five years… strange but possible. He looked at the cages above, put on his glasses, and read: ten years, forty years… what? He thought he'd misread. One had been born in 1861. Another in 1847.

Valverde turned away, smiling at the joke Ansaldi was playing on him, because he couldn't believe Ansaldi thought him so stupid.

Ansaldi noticed and smiled back.

"It's no joke," he said, and that expression sounded so strange that the ridiculousness of hearing it collapsed as soon as he continued in his learned yet folksy tone.

"I already told you they're experiments. Who wants a dog to live that long? Only fools—another asynchronous word—and sentimental imbeciles who are everywhere. I've heard you've experimented on men and women; I know about the bodies you collected in the last flood, for example. You sell them to science, all very commendable, my friend. But there's an expression around here that goes, 'Get a reputation and then rest on your laurels.' I can help you."

-I know, it's no secret that certain things worry me.

-Death, for example. Some don't consider it as terrible as you do.

-It's nothingness, Ansaldi, and I don't understand it.

-You want to prolong your life, and what you see here can help you…

- But does it help me if a dog lives sixty years?

Ansaldi looked at him intelligently.

Juan Valverde looked at the dogs that were listening to them. He climbed up to the third row of cages, where the oldest dog he had seen so far was kept, at least. It was exactly like the others, with no signs of age. Extremely

white, blind, and alert to every movement around it. The smell of excrement was intense, and the filth in the cages was appalling. But Valverde put his hand between the bars, and the dog sniffed it for a moment and then licked it.
From below, Gregorio Ansaldi applauded.

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"Let's go see the sick woman," the old woman suggested.
Altea lay propped up on two large pillows, covered with a poncho and a wool blanket. Even so, her jaw trembled with cold. The hearth was unlit. The old woman scolded a Black woman who sat watching Altea. The Black woman got up, startled, and began to replenish the firewood and stir the embers, but every now and then she glanced rapturously toward the bed.
"It's strange, but we didn't see any other people at the ranch yesterday," Mara said.
-They're from the surrounding ranches, they work part-time with us. They get paid in the afternoon and leave. We don't like having people who aren't family here at night.
Altea had long, gray hair. Now without bandages, the eye socket was a black hole in her white face. The trembling subsided as Marietta rubbed her chest and back. Mara stood at the foot of the bed. The old woman murmured something that sounded like a litany but was simply the affectionate words spoken to a sick person. As she did so, she watched Altea's face, reading the expressions her words provoked, and Mara even thought she saw her blow on her face as if to brush her hair aside.
Did Mara really hear the echo of that breath in the empty orbit, which sounded like an icy blast in a cavern?
Marietta smiled. She stopped rubbing the body, which was no longer trembling. She caressed the face and the edges of the empty eye socket.
Mara was afraid. She had brought her not for hope, but for eviction.

"What do you think?" she asked anxiously.
"What about?" the other asked, without turning around.
Since he received no answer, he asked:
-If she's not honest with me, my dear, don't expect me to be honest with her.
-I don't think he'll live...
- Is it a premonition or a wish?
Mara did not answer.
"For many of us, it's confusing at first, but it's clear that, in you, my dear, desire is the root of all desire. It's because of the boy this woman just gave birth to, isn't it?"
"As far as I'm concerned, the boy can die, but without him I won't be able to keep the father."
The old woman got out of bed and stood beside them. She pointed to her ears in a gesture that indicated that Altea could hear them, and above all, see them.
"And you think he'll stay? Men say they don't understand us and underestimate us. We are as different as they are at every moment, but we know who we were and who we will be. In them, ambivalence has no way of communicating with each other; they don't remember what they were and they continually fail when it comes to the future. Their idealism is cruel, and they don't realize it because they've forgotten the damage they did just moments before. They are capricious boys convinced of their own righteousness. Yes, that makes them innocent, but it also makes them killers by nature. They destroy everything with the best of intentions."
- And what about us?
"We killed deliberately. That's why there's no pain or remorse. When they remember, the guilt is all the greater the more naive their motive was. And it clings to them like a tick."
Mara sat down in a chair next to the bed. Marietta did the same on the other side.
"Is she like us?" Mara asked.
-Yes, but he doesn't know it. And that gap is the mechanical artifice, as Gregorio would say, it's the instrument.
- An instrument for what?

The rain began to fall on the roof. Mara got up to look out the window. The countryside was gray, and the rain moved like multiple curtains buffeted by the wind. Some men ran to take shelter in the stables or under the portico. The room had darkened except for the hearth fire, which was suffering from the gusts of wind coming down the chimney.
Suddenly, she saw a very faint light from the bed. Marietta was still sitting facing Altea. Mara turned around and then noticed the light coming from Altea's eye socket. It was now a perfectly circular opening, perhaps because the light was obscuring the irregular edges of the bone.
What did he smell like?, he wondered.
“It’s like the full moon, isn’t it?” said the old woman. “Look closely, my dear, the moon—unlike the sun, so brutal and violent, resembling a man enraged—has the virtue of revealing itself to the naked eye, with all its flaws. It even illuminates them so we can see its irregularities. Or perhaps that light comes from those flaws. Nature’s errors are a zero behind every number: they grow until they encompass everything, and turn nothingness into the goal of the world. Boasting becomes pride, something men don’t understand except when they destroy their ambivalence and become one with their feminine side. They deny it because they believe it to be weakness, but it is the zero after the last digit.”
Mara sat up in bed. The moonlight had sunk deep into the hollow of her face. The moon's surface, however, was not still. There were clouds in large clusters that drifted like slow eddies, and tiny flashes like sparks from newly lit fires. It was cold, and the bonfires that the inhabitants of the moon were preparing for the coming polar night were necessary.
The sound of the rain drummed violently on the roof, disturbing the surface of the moon, which, like a yellow eye, dwelled and protruded slightly from Altea's face. So much rain was falling that she tried to look out the window at the fields once more, in case another flood was imminent. But the fields were dry while the rain fell, and the mud was merely a worthless substance that the men kicked up with their boots.
However, the surface of the moon was being affected, in the mid-afternoon, shortly after noon, inside a room in the main house of a Brazilian ranch in a small town, suffering the confinement within a pit surrounded by bone walls. It was disintegrating into fragments through cracks that were

forming all across its surface. The moon was struggling to grow, to expand, perhaps.
Mara looked at Marietta, so close to her, yet her thoughts so distant, bathed in moonlight. The old woman's eyes, green as cistern water, reflected the light that was rapidly turning into towering flames that shot out tongues of fire.
He looked at Altea: her entire face was covered in sores. The luminous well was moving, as if the fiery globe were being pushed from the bottom. He wondered what would happen if the fire finally spread and burned the house down in that afternoon's rain. Water or fire, which would survive?
She heard the crackling of something burning. She remembered the Paraguayan War, the last vestiges of the war she had witnessed when she was so young and had barely set foot in America. Hand in hand with Santiago, she had seen from some port, perhaps in Corrientes or Paraguay, the burning corpses left on the battlefield. That sound of crackling bones was more intense than the smell, because it was like shrapnel bombs the dead were firing at the living who watched it all. Mara had wept uncontrollably; a lump had formed in her throat. Santiago had hugged her, pressing her head to his chest.
It was the same noise.
He turned his gaze back to the window and the countryside. A gray halo rose from the earth, perhaps dust stirred up by the onslaught of rain, settling down once again, damp and heavy; perhaps steam rising from the temperature difference between the water and the land. Whatever it was, the gray halo was like the surface of a boundless river. A sea, possibly.
The crackling sound emitted splinters and fragments of bone.
They fell onto the surface of the water.
He looked at the cracked moon, twisted like a naked old man who was dying and protesting uselessly with anger and impotence.
And the children of the land - the laborers who went from one side of the ranch to the other with tools or pulling the reins of the mules, the women who carried kettles and plates, all running in the rain, laughing joyfully - stole what they found: the bones that fell from the sky.
And with all that they built their houses, their cities. And they formed nations that waged war against each other with that same fire.

Mara was crying again, just like she had so many years before. Now there was no lump in her throat, because she felt no anguish, only the curious sense of what was natural. Fire burns, and therefore it is natural and necessary that the bone should suffer too. And all the flesh that surrounds it.
Instruments wear out, break, and we must discard them. Some are thrown out into the street, but others remain forever abandoned in some attic, some room that is never visited again.
Altea's body, now without light, with the hollow of his eye cold and dry like a wasteland, lay on the bed, until at night the men came to look for him.

The night of the funeral procession, there were many people at the ranch. Although its owners didn't like it, it wasn't every day someone died there. And, as was fitting for the opinion that everyone in the surrounding area had formed over the past few years—because no one really remembered when the Ansaldi family had arrived—they prepared the house for the appropriate funeral procession.
Four women from the town of Aparecida prepared the body. They were four healers with a bad reputation, and they saw Marietta Sottocorno as an enemy with whom they nevertheless had to pretend to be on good terms, especially on an occasion like this, when they could spy on the inside of the mansion and perhaps discover something of what was so often talked about in the town: fetishes that Ansaldi brought from Africa, or strange elements of palmistry brought from old Europe.
They undressed the body, washed it, and dressed it again in a white shroud, since she had given birth shortly before, and it was considered bad luck for the child to be buried in black. Marietta oversaw everything from the doorway. Mara watched and offered to help, but the women didn't deign to answer this stranger. One of them, the oldest, who must have been the younger woman's older sister and aunt, made a gesture of disdain when Mara approached.
"Arriaga!" Marietta shouted.
The other one looked at her, nodded, and said nothing.
Later he learned that the Arraiga were an entire clan of women where there were only two or three men: the father and one or two sons. The village gossips said that when a son was born, they let him die in his cradle.

They would listen to him cry for days if the boy survived, then nothing but silence and the cradle ready to receive the next daughter. They all dedicated themselves to the same task when they grew up. They were the aesthetes of the dead.
They painted the body, combed the white hair. They adorned it with earrings so small they were only noticeable when the candlelight made them sparkle like a firefly. They perfumed it with a blend of incenses where a faint scent of hemp prevailed. No one could have said why they had chosen such a scent, but they recognized the curious effect of what they believed to be an anomaly in custom.
As night fell, the rain had stopped and the sky was clear. The moon illuminated the main house of the ranch, but it didn't seem to envy the many lamps and fires lit by the ranch hands in the surrounding area. Four men entered with the coffin, placed the body inside, and carried it to the main room of the house for the wake.
Throughout the night, visitors came by one by one. No one from the area had ever met her before, but almost all of them wept as they approached the coffin. Mara and Valverde sat in chairs against the wall behind the casket. The homeowners stood greeting the visitors. They were all locals, with a few close friends among them, the Gonçalvez family, for example, whose company handled almost all the funeral arrangements. The coffin and the workers who had carried it from the village belonged to them. Valverde heard the surname and noticed how much they resembled Estanislao.
It was three in the morning when everyone left, and the four of them remained with two of the Arriaga family and two of the Gonçalvez family. Mara got up from her chair. Her legs ached after sitting for several hours. She walked in circles around the coffin. The candle flames flickered with her steps. Too much silence, she told herself, as if I'd suddenly gone deaf. Don't my shoes make a sound on the wooden floor? And don't these strong men from the funeral service breathe? And Ansaldi's voice, hoarse from smoking?
But silence was natural to death, and it was also necessary so that she would be the first to hear what was coming.
The familiar flapping of the Brazilian bats, which were quite at ease in their territory, arriving from who knows where, but approaching with a sound I

had never heard before. There were many more of them than before, perhaps.
The flapping of wings grew louder, and yet no one inside seemed to pay any attention. Mara had been afraid of them on the ship, but now that fear had turned into anguish that was beginning to transform into despair. There was nowhere to hide. They would invade the room, enter the one with all the windows open. They would extinguish the candles with their flight, overturn the candelabras, tear down the curtains, and leave droppings on Altea's body.
Then they entered through the windows and doors. Ansaldi and Marietta didn't move; they turned their heads to watch the bats fly around them without touching them. The Arriaga women protested and covered their heads with their large scarves; the men flinched when they were touched and felt the bats' legs on them, or when the screeches deafened them. Sometimes the Gonçálvez family laughed when they heard them; other times they looked angry or terrified.
There are languages that only men understand, Mara knew that well. Because she had seen the face of despair on José's face.
Bats flew swiftly around the room. They flew up and down from the ceiling, some settled hanging upside down from the beams, and a few others did the same from the edge of the coffin. Mara tried to shoo them away, but all she managed to do was make them land on Altea's body, dragging their wings across the corpse, moving closer to her head. The movement of them all resembled a procession.
Mara had begun to tremble. She was terrified, not for Altea, because she was already dead, nor for herself or the others, who were used to it by now. She covered her face, stifling the scream that was escaping her involuntarily. And she couldn't hold it back when the bats flew into the void of her eye.
They were simply disappearing inside, and there was no light other than the moonlight coming through the windows.
The flapping of wings from those still flying caused dizzying lights and shadows that confused things: men passing by, arms waving, curtains swaying, and even fixed objects moving due to the effect of the shadows. The skull of Altea began to crack due to the entry of bats. The skull was a room made of adobe, wood, and lime, which could easily be cracked.

She suddenly thought of José. His name written in the flight of bats. The blows she had given him to the head. The nightmares that had never truly ceased and that she tried to contain by caressing his body, pampering him in the deep well of his dreams. She had heard him say that sometimes his head felt like it was going to explode.
Manuel had died atoning, with long malice, for the death of a boy, and José would also die because Altea was going to take him away.
That enemy, whom she had believed to be weak in life, powerless during her illness, and definitively defeated afterwards, was now stronger than Mara because she had the bats on her side.

*

The following midday, the funeral procession consisted of the four Gonçalvez employees, but one of them had been replaced by Valverde, who was helping to carry the coffin. A priest walked in front, followed by a boy who was trying to keep up, but kept getting distracted by scratching his hair and occasionally lifting his gown to scratch a flea rash. Behind the coffin walked the Ansaldi couple, arm in arm, he proud and haughty, she looking at the ground.
Mara walked a few steps behind, lost in thought. She was thinking about José and his impending death. The signs she had seen the night before confirmed it: the bats, the headaches, and the nightmares that had plagued him for so long. Something had been plotted against the Menéndez Iribarne brothers, a grudge that was perhaps a punishment, or simply an ancestral retribution that involved, perhaps, not the moral judgments of men, but the sense of guilt instilled in them. So many times he had told her about his family's traditions in Cádiz, their relationship with the Church, and the devotion of one man from each generation. Merit and demerit thus became canons that could not be broken without destroying the very essence of a caste. Culture was part of all that, as were traditions and

rituals, and money, above and below all of it. The power of the Church and the maintenance and reputation of a family were all that had to be preserved without question.

Men get used to everything, accepting it and keeping quiet. Killing others or beating their own bodies if they don't dare. But mainly molding their minds to duty and obedience.

Because guilt runs too deep, with enormous roots from ancient trees that have grown side by side in a dark jungle. Tangles above and below the ground. And among the recesses of branches and roots, nests of creatures no one knows are always forming, their shapes taking form over time. They can be black as mud, gray as ash, or luminous like fireflies seen only at night. But all these creatures have forms as unknown and as varied as imagination.

Mara knew all this because she had heard José in his dreams. Imagination feeds the nests of these vermin: guilt is a cancer that creates hollows and deposits cells and germs. Guilt is a beast of so many forms that it can never be caught and fought. Guilt hides, disguises itself. It speaks with reason and acts with madness. At times it takes on the image of God and recreates in the spirit and body the beatitude of the saints. At times it is a chaos of beasts that bite, sting, and tear apart only to rebuild what they will bite, sting, and tear apart again an instant later. What is born, dies. What dies, is reborn.

"That's hell," Mara told herself, walking with her arms crossed. She was thinking about how to prevent José Iribarne from dying, because she wanted to save him as he had saved her. José, with his irony and sarcasm, his impiety and perversion laid bare, his lies and secrets. The pleasure he felt in his wickedness, and the suffering that elevated him above all other men. Those who behave well, the mediocre, will never be elevated. Evil is a crown on the heads of many chosen ones, a royalty that evolves so slowly that it seems unchanged in the eyes of the convinced. But those who doubt see hell and heaven in every human cell: the bridge between them is built over a dry, bottomless river.

Mara knows that nothingness is just a stupid word, as contradictory as only flimsy human logic could have invented.

But she saw the circles surrounding the heads of everyone present at the funeral. Circles of infinite nature, like the cross Natacha had told her

about. Surrounding the bottomless river: the only nothingness into which everything plunges to disappear. Not even a memory remains.
True nothingness is as inconceivable as absolute emptiness. And therein lies human imagination, to escape the maelstrom of despair. It creates forms, cancers of symbolism, monsters of ideas, visible abysses in exchange for the implausibility of bottomless pits.
Cracks in rocks are like fractures in bones. Interruptions, cold abysses where the cold cuts and creates more cracks. Sometimes they are filled with something, like balms, but from the dryness that cracked the structure, nothing but more dryness can be obtained.
Mara once read, or someone told her, that nature does not tolerate a vacuum. But watching the procession slowly moving before her, several kilometers toward the village cemetery, under the improbably clear sky of a winter midday, she knows that nature has nothing to do with what is happening.
Guilt, perhaps remorse, is a child born with an axe in its head. God has nothing to do with nature, just as the emptiness between stones or the breaking of a bone has nothing to do with it. What science explains with the naive mediocrity of its talent, nothingness absorbs into absurdity. The fracture of nothingness mocks the circle that surrounds it, chaos like a god that forms and destroys itself. Timeless repetition is desolation.
That's what killed Manuel, probably: desolation. And that's what José stubbornly tried to avoid with his constant, unwavering, and unscrupulous activity. As if his body were a shield, he held it up to the bats. But they come from the same eye that sees them.
Mara had been a woman adrift in a sea of liquor. The sea had dried up, and only the tortuous bed of her soul remained, dry as a desert, but where the heat generated visions that were not exactly oases, but parallel worlds. She saw everyone's life as multiple lives where it was impossible to discern which was the true one, perhaps because they all were.
José had done that: dried up the sea that surrounded her and left her in a wasteland, and the wasteland was a paradise of boredom, and boredom was the spur that had made her crawl to the edge of a fracture, whose bottom was limited by the sky.
He looked up and smelled the scent of the cemetery, which was on a hill a little over a hundred meters away. The dirt road had begun to turn stony,

the men in the funeral procession stumbled, and the coffin sometimes swayed from side to side.
Some dogs followed them too, from the ranch, especially Valverde, with whom they shared an affinity that never ceased to amaze everyone. The villagers who trailed behind them, in two lines that broke apart and reformed at every bend in the open field path, spoke of the animals and Valverde more than of the dead woman, whom they had never met. They called her "the Norwegian," because of her appearance and the rumors that had reached them from the south. The miraculous woman who had given birth while on her deathbed, who had recovered and yet had died. Had anyone else seen the bats entering her skull that night? Old Marietta, perhaps, but she wouldn't admit it in front of the others. However, Mara sensed that all those people knew. It's not for nothing that one lives so long with a couple like the Ansaldis. The nighttime solitude of the ranch, the silence of all the animals except the dogs, and the smell that filled the main house and dissipated in the mornings when the men and women arrived. The smell of manure, of boiled or curdled milk, and the laughter that clothed the stark silence in work clothes or leisure attire.
He saw the crosses of the cemetery rise from the curved surface of the hill. It was the hump of a giant jester buried upside down. He even thought he could hear its laughter underground, seeing the men's difficulty walking among the stones that it had, perhaps, placed there. When they were almost in front of the open grave prepared by the gravediggers, after crossing meters and meters of tombs with crooked or fallen crosses, Valverde stumbled.
Mara didn't see exactly how it happened. She had seen him navigate the stones more skillfully than the others the whole way. But this time he fell to the ground, his legs twisted, his arm caught in the handle of the coffin, which had fallen on his back. She saw him try to get up, but his arm must have been dislocated, and the weight on top of him prevented him from adjusting his legs to stand. The other three men helped him.
Mara didn't see when the dogs appeared. She had forgotten about them, and now, suddenly, there were many of them running through the crowd, pushing and growling. The first one lunged at one of the Gonçalvez men, who was trying to reposition Valverde's arm. The animals must have thought he was attacking him, because first one, and then all of them

together, bit the man. Shreds of cloth, patches of blood mixed with hair, and soon his body was almost naked, trying to protect his face and throat with his arms. But the dogs were pulling at one arm, and others did the same to the other, and then his legs, which twitched in spasms, trying to free themselves from the dogs' teeth. Then they turned on their prey, tearing at the rest of his body, and his face.

Valverde had shouted, but his voice wasn't firm, it was pained. He was sure they would obey, but his voice held more pain than command. Ansaldi approached, shouting, but they paid him no attention. No one dared approach, of course; there were many dogs, and while some attacked, relentlessly biting and tearing at Gonçalvez's flesh, the others formed a semicircle protecting Valverde.

There was a shot, followed by others; perhaps one of the men from the village always carried a pistol, even when attending a funeral. It was the only thing they could do. Five dogs died, those whose teeth were on Gonçalvez's body. The others left when Valverde was able to get up and give them orders this time in a firm, commanding voice. He was in pain, and his arm was limp, broken again in the same place as before.

Ansaldi gave orders: while some continued the burial, others carried the wounded man to the ranch house. Mara was with Valverde, helping to calm him and walk. Perhaps he had broken a leg, too, and his back hurt terribly.

Altea was buried. The Gonçálvez brothers reluctantly performed the rite, and then returned to the room to see the other. But the man had bled profusely the entire way.

Horacio Gonçálvez lay dying all afternoon. Valverde sat beside him on the bed, trying to distract him from the pain that the injections couldn't soothe. They talked about family. He had known Estanislao, Horacio's second cousin. He remembered him fondly, but it was impossible to talk about him much without bringing up old grudges and resentments. "What became of him?" he asked. Valverde didn't want to tell him the truth. "I haven't seen him since," he said. The wounded man, however, no longer cared. His wounds hurt every time he breathed. Half his face was fleshless, and the bones of his nose and jaw were visible. His arms and legs were like anatomy models mounted for a medical school lesson, tendons severed, muscles ripped open, and bones exposed. His abdomen was skinless, and

one of the dogs seemed to have been digging inside, and his chest was a framework of broken ribs.
When he died, at five in the afternoon, the brothers held a wake for him, allowing no one else to accompany them. They only permitted the Arraiga sisters to wash the body, stitching some wounds, covering others with cloth, and then dressed him in the suit they usually wore to funeral processions. One of the brothers had changed his clothes and given them to Horacio so he could be buried in his own attire.
Mara didn't speak to Valverde about what had happened. After leaving him only slightly relieved of his anguish, she slept in the living room that night, where there was a large sofa. But she didn't even lie down. She remained seated, thinking, until she fell asleep.
A dog was under the armchair, as if it too were being looked after because she was Juan Valverde's partner. But what if they saw me attack it? Or simply hurt it? I was sure they'd change their minds. Loyalty to Valverde was the strangest thing she'd ever seen in any animal in her entire life in Spain or along the coast. Even Ansaldi had been surprised by this kind of connection between souls—that's what he called the phenomenon.
She closed her eyes and thought of José with his son in his arms, on the bow of a ship crossing the Atlantic. All around, the surface of the sea reflected the moon, all around, the sky full of stars among which the sea moved. She thought of her own journey in the opposite direction, she on the stern trying to see what was getting smaller and smaller. Her daughter Elsa in her father's arms. That had been a morning long before, and José's journey would begin at night.
The luminous darkness was a good sign for them all. The dichotomy of the soul, the ambivalence of the body. The spirit of doubt was balance.
José had helped her find him. She would help him continue.
She fell asleep, this time peacefully, and when she awoke in the morning, the dog was sitting beside her, staring at her. Mara already knew what she had to do. She kicked him. The dog didn't fight back, but after a whimper of pain, he let out a growl. Mara smiled to herself; she mustn't let a blind dog see her hidden smile. Yes, the eternal contradiction, she told herself, was the seed from which the world had been formed.

From then on, he argued with Valverde, and Juan couldn't understand what her objective was. He tried to read her expression, but he didn't find the obstinacy of the old whore he'd once known. The one who opened her vagina but kept her mouth shut for every word. He wasn't about to dwell on it either; his arm ached, and the pain was sharp, coming and going with the hours and the changing temperatures from morning to afternoon and from afternoon to night. Some dogs always kept him company in the room where Mara no longer slept. He had learned to identify them and had given each one a name. They weren't always the same ones; there seemed to be a camaraderie among them that made them take turns watching over him. He would wake up to one of them licking his injured arm and eat with them in bed. The maids didn't want to go in, and Ansaldi or Marietta had to bring him his food. As Mara entered, she noticed the dogs turning their heads towards her and emitting disapproving growls.

"What's your problem with dogs?" Valverde asked one morning with his breakfast tray on his knees.

-Nothing, what else can it be? They only like you.

Then she would argue about anything and everything, raising her voice and sometimes managing to exasperate Valverde's patience, already strained by the pain that had lasted far too long. When he decided to remain silent and not answer, she would continue her discourse, which defied all logic. Had she gone mad? he wondered. Was it remorse over Altea's death? If he hadn't known her for so long, he would have been convinced of this reason, but Mara was different. Was she really? Was n't she also a woman, even if she was a kind of witch, of which he had no more clues than what she herself had told him? In any case, he didn't delve any further into Mara's motives. He was now fascinated by dogs and their behavior, by that instinct that could only have stemmed from some kind of common ancestry between them. Primitive man and animal protected each other, and instinct evolves into feeling. As it matures, it crystallizes into something delicate that erupts at any provocation or threat, however trivial. A word out of place, a contemptuous tone, the uncertain movement of a hand.

On Sunday night, Mara stayed in the living room drinking the whisky Ansaldi kept in one of the dining room cabinets. There was everything: vodka, brandy, liqueurs, cognac, and wines from all over the world. She chose the whisky because it had been so long since she'd had a drink. She

knew it would upset her stomach after so long, but it was necessary for that night. She knew how much she could tolerate before she couldn't get up, so she drank glass after glass, neat, slowly, watching the clocks. As always, one was working and the other had no hands, but both ticked steadily. It was one in the morning; Valverde must still be awake, perhaps reading, with three or four dogs around, some on the bed, others on the floor. She looked back at the clock without time and continued to observe it for a long while, its duration only intuited by her own biological chronology: the rhythm of her racing heartbeat that made the hours pass as if they were minutes, her breath held until her chest ached. The whiskey was taking effect.

"I missed you," she said aloud, looking at the glass she placed on the back of the armchair. When she stood up, the glass fell to the floor. She walked with a dizzy feeling, stopped, and took a deep breath. She felt better now. She went to the hearth, grabbed the shovel, and started walking toward Valverde's room.

He entered without knocking, the shovel held tightly in his one hand. There was a lamp on the small table beside the bed. Valverde had a book in his hands and was wearing his glasses. The light illuminated the left side of his body, casting a golden hue over the curly hair on his chest. He didn't see her; he had fallen asleep with the book open after taking morphine, probably. She would wake him with nothing more than a scream, and that was enough.

Mara walked across the carpet toward the bed. A dog on the mattress, next to Valverde, raised its head. Three others were around the bed, and perhaps a few more underneath. She had to get past that barrier. She wanted them to sense the latent threat, but she also needed them to hesitate until the very last moment.

"Good evening," he said to them. They were sensitive to the cordial tone. They stood up, stepped back, and sat down.

Mara then stood by the bed. She had to be quick; there wouldn't be a second chance.

She brought the blow down on Valverde's head. She was weak, because the whiskey had weakened her; that's why she drank. Alcohol was sometimes a friend who helped without asking questions.

There was a scream, but the sound of the shovel rising, its shadow drawn on the ceiling, and Mara's guttural groan were enough to drown her out. The dogs pounced on her, the three on the floor on her back and two more emerging from under the bed. The one on the mattress, on top of the sheets, bit Mara's face and didn't let go until later, when the Gonçalvez family, alarmed by the screams and barking, rushed in and killed it.
When Juan Valverde woke up, he had a large bump on his forehead and an ice pack. He looked at the bed, still covered in blood because they hadn't managed to change him. Marietta and Gregorio were sitting there, watching him, and the dogs were around again, more vigilant and wary.
"We are so sorry for all the misfortunes, Juan," Ansaldi said. But Valverde remembered nothing; he had taken so much morphine that even now he was still tired, but he felt no pain.
He looked at them, asking what had happened. They told him. Juan thought and thought all afternoon. Mara had been buried in a grave next to Altea's, and it had taken the Arraiga sisters a lot of effort to piece together at least some of Mara's remains. They had dedicated themselves to her for many hours of the night. Marietta had watched them work from the doorway, but this time there was no resentment, only complicity. Sometimes she offered advice, and the others didn't complain.
“After all, she was an Aranguren,” the eldest Arriaga had said. In her hands, silence evoked stories.
"Why did he do it?" Valverde asked.
Marietta answered him wearily.
"You men and your selfishness. Women are dying and you wonder why..."
She stood up, as if tired of listening to nonsense, but deigned to reply: "The reason lies with the one asking." And without further condescension, she turned, wrapping herself in her usual shawl, and left the room.

No more than ten days had passed before Valverde was up and working in the dog kennels. He spent many hours there, walking among the cages, climbing them, and making notes that he would later compare and revise at night in his room. Sometimes he dreamed of Mara standing before him, the lamplight shining on her face, the shovel held high in her arms. No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn't convince himself it was madness. Sometimes he thought about the ship, about those who had been

left behind. The newborn boy in the hands of two men who would fight over him. But she loved only one, and if she had once beaten him almost to death, it was precisely for that reason. Love is a precious thing that is easily corrupted in brute hands. What she hadn't forgiven herself for, she had made up for.

Yes, now I thought I understood. José and the boy shouldn't be separated. But that was the story of the others.

The next morning he dressed in clothes the farmhands had given him. The women prepared a large farewell breakfast for him. And while he ate frugally from the table laden with delicious food, he watched the cart being loaded with the cages of the twenty dogs he had chosen, which were covered with tarpaulins. Those that were loose would walk alongside the young mule.

Would he pay for the dogs he was taking?

-No, my friend. They are yours, although I didn't know it until you arrived.

He had asked her to kill the others.

The old man hesitated for a moment, and said:

"If you see me hesitate, it's simply out of sentimentality, but I know it must be done. You, my friend, are the one who will take care of them. As I expected, you have chosen the best."

Valverde said goodbye to everyone and climbed into the cart. The white dogs went ahead of the mule, which was already used to them. They formed a vanguard for Juan Valverde de Amusco and his load, from which plaintive howls could be heard as columns of smoke rose from the sheds where they had been kept.

The cart slowly moved away northwards, inland, trying to enter deep Brazil, under an overcast sky that blended with the gray smoke of dead dogs.

12

Mendoza gazed at the coast, inland, where Altea had been taken more than a week before. Corporal Domínguez had followed him with his eyes for the first two days, then circled around whenever he saw him idle, alternating a greeting with some trivial comment. Later, one afternoon, he appeared at his office and asked when they would set sail to continue with their business commitments. The captain had told him:

- Do you think I can continue my journey before Mrs. Altea returns?

Domínguez did nothing but keep his mouth shut. Who was this corporal, Mendoza often wondered, behind the humble submissiveness he used to hide? He had seen him observe the crew and the ship as if taking notes with his eyes, writing from memory in his cabin in some worn notebook he kept hidden under his uniform. He had seen him read the books Natacha brought him, heard him talk about history and politics, and on one occasion heard him get into an argument with Iribarne about Spain and its colonies. It was the only time he saw him raise his voice and become heated. He observed Iribarne's expression of satisfaction at having provoked him, and the admiration it had inspired in Natacha. Even the boy Ruiz had sat throughout the entire argument, listening intently to the corporal's every word and gesture.

Domínguez took a piece of paper from his pocket and handed it to the captain. It was a telegram from the governor. He already knew the corporal was one of Farías's henchmen, but he hadn't expected them to maintain such careful communication.

"And why are you showing me this? Just tell me that Farías orders this or that..." Irony never landed well with Mendoza, but he continued because he needed to vent. "Aren't you related to the governor? Because it seems strange to me that you have someone so...how should I put it...so cultured, perhaps? You're an educated man, Corporal, and if you're still in that rank it's not because they didn't want to promote you, but because you're more useful this way."

Domínguez looked him in the eye as the veiled shadow of dusk appeared from behind the furniture and curtains. The corporal's face was now stern, and he resembled one of those writers whose engravings appear at the beginning of 17th or 18th-century philosophy or history books.

"Actually, Captain, I'm the governor's protégé. I was practically born an orphan in Posadas. My mother died of postpartum complications a few days

after I was born, and my father, who knows, they say he was a Jesuit, one of the few left around here. Maybe he wasn't even a priest anymore because the order had been banned worldwide, as you know. He was just a man, and my mother, who knows... The governor said she was half-Indian, but an old woman claims to have known her and told me she was Uruguayan, from a well-to-do family, I don't know, during the siege of Montevideo. The governor sent me to study law and theology in Córdoba. I spent time in Buenos Aires taking classes with Gutiérrez on history and literature. When I came back to Posadas, the governor grabbed me by the shoulders and said, 'Young man, I can't keep you in my service; you're too intelligent to serve me now.'"
Captain Mendoza couldn't help but smile.
- So why is he using it as a spy, then?
- Who knows! Maybe the more you know, the more you doubt. Knowing is one thing, but learning is another. I've realized that you learn in life, not in a classroom.
"And are you prepared to arrest me, or even execute me, as it says here, if I resist? Excuse me, Corporal, but I don't see you as a very seasoned soldier. And it's strange that Farías sent you with such a peremptory order."
"My job was to keep you in the river, Captain. A shot is a warning. I have hunting experience, Captain, and I already proved my marksmanship when the Iribarne incident happened."
"But are you willing to execute me? That's not what the Oro or the Funes taught you..."
Dominguez laughed.
"What are you laughing at, corporal?" Mendoza tried to appear angry to hide his unease.
-Well, Captain, it's been said for some time that Funes was one of those who betrayed Liniers and the others who were executed in Córdoba.
The corporal took his weapon, which he had been carrying slung over his shoulder, and presented arms to Captain Mendoza, who was trying to scrutinize every action of this man who was a mixture of many men, especially the know-it-all priest and the corrupt military man. But at the same time, he was neither of them. He had said, a moment before, that one learns in life, and the corporal, besides observing, was acting.

They parted that afternoon, almost at dusk, in a silent farewell that implied agreement. The captain on his ship, the ship on the river, and the river continuing, no longer the Paraná, but the Paranaíba. To the east lay the confluence with the Río Grande, but the business he had arranged was on the other side, the more hidden west, more conducive to Farías's dealings, which seemed to be expanding ever further. And he had demonstrated a greater intelligence than anyone had expected upon meeting him, by sending not assassins or armies, but skilled men. A lawyer with a sanctimonious air and a rifle in his hands was undoubtedly more useful to him. Was he prepared to obey him, or to risk being shot without anyone missing him or demanding an explanation for his death?

But before the corporal's visit, Iribarne's constant presence had kept him irritated. He paced back and forth on deck with the boy in his arms. He hadn't named him yet because he expected the mother to do so upon her return. But José wasn't showing impatience for Altea, but rather for something that seemed to be calling him from the north, where his gaze drifted when he was distracted and holding the baby. Even though he was his nephew, Mendoza told himself, he didn't understand the anxiety he saw in his face, in the way his body language played when he held the boy, and in the movements of his hands when he rocked him or fed him goat's milk with a cloth teat.

“The weather is splendid around here,” Iribarne said one afternoon, sitting in the rocking chair that had been in Altea’s room and which he brought out to let the baby sleep in the warmth of the afternoon nap. Natacha and Carmen had claimed responsibility for the newborn’s care, but beyond changing his diapers or bathing him, Iribarne had taken over almost all of his time. At night, he slept in their cabin, in a crib next to the bed. Carmen made sure everyone knew she had heard him talking to the boy—sometimes lullabies, other times Catholic prayers in Latin, other times, who knows… It all seemed strange to her, and she had given up trying to interfere. Around that same time, she had already decided to leave the ship.

-Captain, if you don't need me anymore, I want to leave…

- And is she going back to her old ways?

Carmen laughed, and the flesh she hid under her dress, which had caused so much talk before, stirred with her laughter.
"I'm too old for that, and I've caught plenty of nasty things from you all, by the way! I mean men in general, Captain..." She looked away, and someone who didn't know her might have seen a blush on her cheeks.
"I have cousins here in Brazil. It's just a matter of finding them, and in the meantime, I'll manage."
-You are free, Carmen.
He wanted to continue, and since he couldn't, the woman helped him.
"None of that, Captain, no sentimentality. I need to feel useful, otherwise I feel like my life is ending. Even being a whore... you know what I mean... a man's smile in those moments is something hard to forget. What you tell us is almost always nonsense, and what you do and build is admirable, because you do it with transformed feeling. You are engineers of the heavens, and when you see it completed, you have a look of absolute ecstasy. You turn feeling into thought, and that thought is then almost celestial."
That's what he was thinking about when he met Iribarne one afternoon on deck. They had their eyes on the northeast, on the Paranaiba.
- When do you think we'll get back on track, Captain?
-I already told him that when Altea returns.
José was certain he wouldn't return, and probably neither would Mara. He had to go back to Spain, and in these latitudes it was more practical to sail as far north as possible, along the Atlantic coast. He got up from the rocking chair and approached the captain, who was gazing at the coast with his arms resting on the railing, a boot tucked between the planks, and smoking a pipe that might have belonged to his father or one of the other famous Hurtado de Mendozas.
"I don't see why you should be acting like a worried husband, Captain. You already have a wife, and Altea isn't your wife, nor is this boy yours."
Mendoza calmly emptied the pipe by tapping it on the railing, put it in its case and stored the case in his pocket.
-I don't think it's yours either.
Iribarne held the sleeping baby with both hands, but he took one off to wipe the sweat from his forehead and cleaned it on his trousers. Now he smiled mockingly.

-Don't make me talk, captain, or we'll come to blows.
-If he hides behind a baby, he probably won't...
Iribarne turned around to leave the boy in the rocking chair.
"Now nothing stands in my way..." As soon as he said it, Mendoza punched him, knocking him to the ground. He'd wanted to do it for a long time. Some men had seen it, but they didn't approach.
Iribarne wiped the blood from his lip and tried to stand with difficulty; his leg still hurt. When he was standing, he said, raising his hands:
"Fine, you win the fight, but let me tell you, that boy has my blood running through his veins, Captain. That boy belongs to me by right, and without his mother..."
Mendoza grabbed him by his clothes.
- And what do you know?
-The same as you, my dear, if you had as much courage to look at yourself as you have to face me.
Mendoza let him go and saw the corporal watching everything from afar, almost from the other end of the ship. The boy Ruiz was with him, and the dog Max.

Finally, the two of them, Domínguez and Iribarne, convinced him to resume the journey toward Paranaíba. As he gave the order, he didn't know if it was his mouth and voice that were uttering the words, but something else he would call fate if he weren't Catholic, or guilt if he followed the beliefs in which he had been raised. In the north lies the beginning, and in the beginning, the causes. Seeking the reasons for things, we explore into the depths, but it is not the south we reach, but the north: the dark hollow of the skull, full of fissures, as he had seen in the anatomy books in Aurora Valverde's library. She had told him of cracks and channels through which nerves and arteries pass, of fractures that seemed to have been there since the beginning of humankind, as if the human brain were a sea subjected to inexhaustible whirlpools of wind, forming those beaches of bones like deformed rocks. And among them all, the *os sphenoidale* is like a bird with petrified wings that has found a single way to take flight: by creating an empty space through which all of creation passes. And with that ferment, it takes flight toward the deep zones where there are no more bones or blood, but the sepulcher of oblivion.

*

The Paranaíba River was narrow, and it was highly likely they would run aground. However, after keeping watch for twenty-four hours, they confirmed that the channel was deep enough for the “Juan Manuel.” For several nights, while keeping watch with his men, and expecting to feel at any moment the scrape of a rock or the dull thud of a sandbar, or perhaps the debris of logs and branches that accumulated in every slow-moving river, he wondered if what he was doing was worthwhile. But was this voyage an obligation imposed by Farías's extortion, or had it not been his goal since he had bought the boat? He had known, from Buenos Aires, that the undertaking would not be easy, that he would encounter obstacles at every kilometer of the route, that he would not be able to know the true state of the river before completing the entire journey, that he would encounter natural disasters, that there would be business deals he would be unable to fulfill. And here he was, in Brazil, with the boat almost intact. It wasn't money or business success that had driven him; those were just excuses.

The ship sailed north along one of the world's longest rivers, a waterway fraught with obstacles, twists and turns, diverse climates, coastlines, towns, and people. But the captain and his ship remained untouched, at least in the eyes of those who watched them pass from the impoverished riverbanks. A French sailing vessel with a massive steam-powered funnel, a kind of monster that belonged to no particular era, but to a peculiar transition, like the autumn they had recently left behind. And the winter they had entered was warmer than that one. The sun glinted off the metal of the hatches and the funnel, and the deck timbers shone neatly, bright, and clean. The men had finally learned what he desired, and they desired the same now. Without women, they were masters of the house. The ship was theirs alone. With the exception of the captain's wife, who had faded

into the background, locked in her cabin, dedicated to her worship of her dead son, or to praying to the ghosts she saw in the corners of the ship. Mendoza spread the maps on the desk in front of the helmsman. Aníbal Molina had grown in stature and experience. The position he had held since Márquez's death had not been too much for him. Suddenly, after hesitating for several days at first, he had become restless and attentive to everything that happened. Now his eyes were fixed on the forward watch, his ears straining to catch any noise beneath the keel or any instruction from the captain, who behind him was consulting the charts that he was only just beginning to understand.

It was night, but the moon was large, its brightness illuminating any obstacle that might lie in their path. The moonlight pierced the waters and faded away. And it was that night that they heard the first cannon fire. Both raised their heads and looked at the guards, who were pointing toward the Brazilian coast. Flashes of light appeared a few seconds before the cannon fire began. It was a monotonous exchange: they would fire from one side, from the southeast, and return fire from the northwest after a while. They seemed like two enemies going through a routine, or two friends answering each other listlessly.

Dominguez appeared with the rifle under his arm.

"Do you know anything about that, corporal?" Mendoza asked.

-They are the rebels, they have not surrendered since the Republic was established.

The captain grabbed the binoculars and explored the coast.

-Soldiers can be seen in the gunpowder light; they look like republicans.

- Many?

Mendoza noticed concern in the corporal's voice.

-I can't tell from here, but they're moving quickly towards the southeast.

He walked along the coast, sensing Domínguez's eagerness to borrow the binoculars. Perhaps he could use that eagerness to extract more information from him. The cape was like an onion with countless layers. Or a Pandora's box.

When he put down the binoculars, Domínguez was looking at the map and pointing with his finger along a route on the river. He had a pencil and was marking a route that was no more than five kilometers long.

"Is there any business deal you're not aware of?" Mendoza asked.

"At these latitudes, Captain, you've probably realized we can't go any further. The river ends, or rather begins, in large lagoons that change every year. You don't know much about these parts, but I've known all this since I was a boy."
"And why did you force me to come all the way here, risking getting stuck? If it was for the money, look, we still have to run into some slave traders from Bom Jesus." He thought of Tomasa, and it would have been better if she had died before hearing this now.
-Because we don't actually need to go to the city. We can meet the passengers on the coast.
- Passengers to where?
"A boat with a passenger is waiting for us six kilometers off the Brazilian coast. It's a diplomatic mission, Captain, though not an official one."
Another layer uncovered, Mendoza thought to himself. Farías and his brother in Buenos Aires were pro-imperialists, or so everyone said. And although it was certain that the Buenos Aires government supported them, it couldn't officially endorse it. The machinations with the Empire during and after the war were more complex than a chess game, and the Argentinians always sought to reclaim their honor after losing their dignity.
"So that was always their mission when they came with us," Mendoza said. "To rescue a member of Don Pedro's family, wasn't that right?"
-What they do doesn't interest us; they are just diplomatic favors that are returned.
- But damn it, Dominguez! Speak plainly once and for all!
The captain's voice had been as loud as the bang on the table. The guards watched from the bow; Molina listened while keeping a watchful eye on the river's surface.
They want to help Isabel, the eldest daughter, regain the throne. They say she's not safe and want to take her to Portugal. From there, who knows...
- And should we take her to Buenos Aires?
-That's right, Captain. But nobody must know, of course.
"Well, I suppose the Empire is rich enough to repay us for this favor. Or am I still stuck with the yoke around my neck and must convert my ship into an imperial carriage for free?"

"Nothing is free, Captain. What the governor said still stands. You don't have to hand over any of what you earned, but you must take us to Buenos Aires."
The cannon fire continued throughout the rest of the night. Sometimes louder and more frequent, other times like dogs coughing.
At dawn, everyone was still at their posts. Mendoza stood with his arms crossed, but his eyes were closing. Molina, as if chained to the helm, didn't let his guard down. His body had grown as resilient as hers. He had let his beard grow longer, because it made him feel more like a captain than a helmsman; he had taken off his shirt, exposing his chest and arm muscles because it made him feel more self-assured. His eyes, however, were tired. The guards were different now that morning was breaking.
Their lunch was brought to them. They put away the cards, compasses, and other instruments. They placed the plates on the table and sat down on the benches. They ate in silence until Iribarne appeared with Bernardo. They had tried to keep the boy from being with them all the time, but what else could he do? There were no other children, and sometimes he got tired of playing with the dog, or Max would leave him and lie down in a corner, ignoring him.
"Are those the fucking Brazilians who fight among themselves?" asked José.
Mendoza nodded.
- We do business with the monarchists, don't we?
Since they didn't respond, he assumed it was true.
"I figured as much. And what will our course be, Captain? Back to Buenos Aires? I'll get off at the next port, I'll let you know."
"Better for everyone, Iribarne," said Mendoza.
"And what are you going to do?" Domínguez's question, as always, seemed casual.
"I don't know what it's any of your business, my dear," said Iribarne, pointing to his leg. But he couldn't help but boast to the man who had shot him, and continued: "I have many acquaintances, businessmen in all sorts of trades, you know, I imagine. Perhaps I can get a few reales from you."
"With his smooth talk, he might sell to some what he bought from others. We all know about business, Iribarne, from the government to the lowest laborer."

Mendoza spoke without letting go of his fork, gesturing with his hand for emphasis. Then, looking at Domínguez, he said:
"Don't worry, corporal, this man is a chameleon. For him, taking sides is like putting a noose around his neck. But the gentleman moves like a bull in a china shop; nobody hears him or notices a thing."
"Thank you for the compliment, Captain. It's the nicest thing anyone's said to me in a long time. Anyway, don't worry, Corporal, I'm not going to ruin your plans. I have other, less lucrative, but more...how should I put it, sentimental and lasting business ventures in mind. Well!" he said, rubbing his hands together and smiling broadly. "I'll tell Mrs. Natacha to get the baby's things ready."
Mendoza looked at Bernardo, but immediately realized his mistake, and stood up.
-He's not thinking of taking Altea's son, is he?
"I'm taking my nephew, Captain, I remind you once again, and I don't see that anyone on this ship has more right than I do."
Mendoza understood, of course. The feeling was no longer just a feeling, but saying it aloud would have been like telling the wind that he was a murderer, that he was unfaithful, that he was a coward. He was all of those things, and yet he was still a man. What bothered him couldn't be said aloud: the hypocrisy he reproached Domínguez and Iribarne for, welled up from the depths of his soul.
"We'll send a note to the Ansaldi residence, we'll ask for Altea." His voice was calm and reasonable.
"You're out of your mind, Captain. I understand, the guilt..." he said, striking a hand on his chest. "If Manuel were alive, he would have known which verse to quote to you, but I only remember that phrase that said: *propter culpam mean,* three times."
Three cannon shots rang out, without pause. And the iniquity they sensed in that number was confirmed when many others returned fire. They looked toward the Brazilian coast, which in a few hours had been transformed into a battlefield very close to the river.
Where there had been sun before, it was now overcast by clouds that were not clouds, but smoke from burning huts and forests, and above all from the constant cannon fire, from which nothing but sparks could be seen in the dense smoke that advanced over the river.

The bow guards had disappeared from their posts and ran off to await orders.
- They're shooting at us, Captain!
Mendoza scanned the area once more with his binoculars. He hoped to be certain of what his men were telling him. So far, they hadn't suffered any damage, and the water was calm.
"What are you waiting for to answer, Captain?" said Iribarne.
- Do you think we're going to defeat those cannons with rifles and pistols?
- And what are those antiques downstairs for?
"They're disassembled, Iribarne. Do you think they're going to attack us, Domínguez?"
"The ship's appearance is confusing, Captain. It's a French ship, and it looks every bit the monarchist. The republicans seem to be winning there on the coast. Lower the Argentine flag."
Yes, he should have done it as soon as they entered the border zone; Mendoza knew it. He sent one of the men, one of the oldest, Antúnez, but it was too late. Antúnez fell on deck, almost cut in two by the shrapnel from the first accurate shot from the shore. All the men ran for cover, rifles in hand, firing without waiting for the captain's orders. They weren't soldiers, and many weren't even sailors. Mendoza and the others threw themselves to the floor. They looked at each other, confused, because they knew full well that they couldn't do anything. In any case, he ordered the boats to be prepared.
The men went in groups of three or four. From his post, Mendoza saw that before the ropes could be untied and the boats lowered, fresh cannon fire was destroying everything. The bombardment was incessant, and the smoke obscured little more than the wreckage of the useless masts. He heard a crash of metal falling down, and then screams. The chimney fell onto the deck and sank to the second sublevel. The boiler had exploded, and now the smoke and fire added to the violence of the cannons.
Mendoza, Domínguez, and Molina searched one after another for the deck boats that were still intact. The corporal carried Bernardo in his arms.
"Iribarne, go find Natacha and the boy and put them in this boat! We'll get them off, but we have to prepare the other one," said Mendoza.
José Iribarne ran below deck, but suddenly a new cannon shot exploded next to him and they saw him sink along with the entire floor.

Natacha stood by the crib. She heard the cannons and the explosions. Shrapnel flew through the window. The hull walls held, but water was seeping in through the window. It was the first below deck, and it would soon flood. Then came the crash, as if the sky were falling. The roof broke above her, and part of the funnel sank into the cabin. Natacha threw herself to the floor and looked up at the immense iron structure behind her. She saw the crib, its legs broken and the wood smoking. The boy, still nameless, was still alive and crying loudly. At first, she tried to crawl under the iron to reach him, but then she saw a light moving through the dust and smoke from the cabinet where his keepsakes lay. She saw Ariel's shadow once more. Would he save her, or would he come for him? She hoped it was the latter. Suddenly she realized that her attachment to life was nothing more than the inertia of duty, or the ominous threat Aunt Clotilde had given her about the damnation of suicide. She felt relieved. The iron building that had fallen as if from the sky was the most fitting symbol for everything she had believed in: God was a construction so perfect that only fire could damage it, and only a little. Fire would never be intense enough to reach the melting point that would transform God's molecules into a lava-like liquid, flowing across the world and burning everything in its path. She smelled the burning. The fire from the boiler at the bottom of the ship, the hot iron above her.

He saw Ariel's figure as the angel he had always compared him to, an incomplete angel because he lacked wings and a sword. And a hand.

She stood still, awaiting the sentence, which she imagined in a thousand ways, having read it in so many books. She expected an iron angel to touch her, that angel so like her father, with blond hair and beard, but she was already certain that it wouldn't be iron she would feel in her hand, but gold.

Ariel approached the broken piece of furniture, grasped the lifeless hand, dry as a mummy, and placed it on her stump. Then the sword appeared in that hand, but there were no wings. And she saw the angel who could never be one weeping. He wept and gazed at her. And the water of his tears flowed so abundantly that it was as if he saw it seeping through the cracks in the walls, covering the floor, rising and rising.

Natacha couldn't get up without hurting her back against the iron. The boy was still screaming. She tried again to reach him when she saw the water beginning to cover him, but suddenly she thought that if Ariel's tears had created that sea, why should she prevent it? If her son suffered even in death, there was no reason why Altea's son shouldn't. They were both bastards, that word men had invented to obscure what they didn't want to see. And yet there were men like Mendoza or Manuel, who accepted other men's children. But was that a merit, or simply a semblance of guilt?
She wouldn't move. God's iron didn't frighten her; she had already endured enough and built in her soul a edifice strong enough to withstand it. She knew, however, that somewhere there was a gap, and in that space lay Ariel's gold, which was perhaps nothing more than the color of wheat stalks, so weak they would crumble in any strong wind. And the wheat dust would resemble gold dust. The same dust that bathed the Indian Christs that so attracted her, those Christs with emaciated limbs, crippled bodies, and leprous faces.
Now the cradle floated on the water, and Natacha, still protected by the narrow space where the iron frame prevented her from drowning, saw the dog going toward it. Max was half swimming and half walking when his paws touched the bottom. The mattress was already soaked and beginning to sink. Max grabbed the sheets with his mouth and led the boy toward the only old door that was still intact, through which nothing entered or left but the water and the sound of the cannons.

They saw Max emerge from the wreckage of the hatch ladder. He was dragging a bundle made of wet sheets.
Mendoza grabbed the dog and was about to abandon the rags when he heard the crying. He saw the boy screaming with broken moans, gray with wet ash clinging to his skin.
- Corporal, take him to Bernardo and come down as soon as the boat is safe!
She was going to pick up Max. The dog was still. So many of her foster dogs had looked the same way. She stroked his back, just a little. She placed her hand on his skull, closing his eyelids.
He saw the water rising through the hatch, and the ship listing. The cannon fire was less frequent and only churned the river water. He would go in

search of his wife, like that time in Poland when he had rescued her from the Cossacks' gunfire.

Natacha heard the splashing and Iribarne's voice calling her. José was at the door, trying to find the boy's crib in the smoke.
- Natasha!
Then he saw her almost completely submerged, on the other side of some twisted metal. He bent down and stretched out his arms to grab her. She was looking at him, but she didn't try to get out.
- What's wrong with you, damn it?! Hold my hands tight!
But she ignored him. He had no choice but to grab her wrists and drag her along like a dead weight. When they were near the door, he propped her up on his knees and brushed the wet hair away from her face.
"Where's the boy?" he asked, looking around but seeing nothing but smoke, iron, and water. The smell of burning was intense, but the water was cooling the iron. He thought he could smell burnt flesh.
"Where's the boy?!" he asked again, this time shouting desperately, squeezing Natacha's face in his hands and shaking it. Natacha's eyes held their usual intelligence, but there was indifference.
José was now certain of his worst fears. The boy he had created must be dead. For the first time, he saw it so clearly that he wondered what had prevented him from seeing it for so long. He had created him as a symbol of Manuel: if he couldn't have one, he would have the other. And he had to be born of his brother's wife. The Holy Trinity was as clear as if he were now in a cathedral made of iron and wood, the incense burning always lit and the holy water overflowing. He remembered the living nativity scenes they set up in Cádiz every Christmas. José and Manuel Menéndez Iribarne participated, sometimes as the same character, sometimes as different characters, depending on how they grew up. Manuel had been the baby Jesus, although José barely remembered him. Then they were shepherds, and as an adult, José had been Joseph, the husband of Mary, but he felt uncomfortable, and the following year he was the Holy Spirit who, in the form of a flame, had conceived the child. And Manuel had had no choice but to take on the role of Joseph the carpenter.
Iribarne felt a sharp pain in his chest as he remembered all of that. Manuel's face, young and dressed in the clothes of a shepherd and

carpenter, his face almost beardless. He would never see him again. He thought of the boy, surely dead. One buried in a forgotten cemetery, without a cross or any other marker. Another burned, perhaps, in expiation of his guilt.
It's Joseph's fault.
He felt the flapping of bats, and looking at the white smoke around him, he saw long black shadows coming and going.
But they no longer frightened him. Fear and anger had merged, giving rise to bitterness.
He picked Natacha up and walked through the corridors until he found a sound staircase.

Mendoza couldn't go down the way the dog had come up, so he ran to the starboard hatch. He saw the faces of his men, who were waiting in the boats. They called to him, but he ignored them. He went down the ladder and in the darkness bumped into Iribarne, and they both fell to the ground. Natacha groaned and screamed. They had both fallen on top of her, and she had a broken arm.
"We did well!" Mendoza said, splinting his wife's leg and trying to calm her down. Then he realized that José Iribarne had saved his wife's life. The other man was strangely silent and staring blankly.
He lifted Natacha and carried her up the ladder. Iribarne followed them slowly. When they were already in the boat, he shouted to her:
- Hurry up, damn it, this place could collapse any minute! Come on!
But José Iribarne walked with a limp, not from his wounded leg, as if his mind, clouded by visions and memories, were deliberately confusing his body. A deranged mind that rejoiced in driving mad those who depended on it: eyes that saw bats everywhere, emerging from the smoke that shrouded the sky, from the broken timbers, the twisted iron, the water that rose in waves with each cannon shot. And the rhythm of the cannons was adjusting to the rhythm of the flapping wings, regular, monotonous, and obsessive. From the boat, they saw him raise his arms and shake off presences they couldn't see. Natacha raised her head and said something.
"What, my dear?" Mendoza asked, just like before, just like in Europe. He looked at Iribarne and didn't dare give the order to lower the boat.

"Don't rush him, Máximo. He's doing what he can with that much weight. It's for the boy."
Mendoza saw José again, approaching like a ghost. But before he could shout that the boy was alive, a new cannon shot suddenly destroyed the bridge and smoke enveloped Iribarne.
"Let's go!" ordered the captain.
Just as he was about to go down, Natacha grabbed his arm with her good hand and pointed to the deck.
Iribarne had appeared once again, a persistent and obstinate figure, with the same obstinacy as those who do not wish to live but are afraid to kill themselves. The contradiction of cowards, perhaps, so similar to his own.
Now José had one arm raised, his hand resting on the back of his neck, and the other behind his back. Was he carrying a load? Had he found any of the men?
Then he saw that on his back he had a charred plank that was still giving off smoke and must be burning him.
"How beautiful!" he heard Natacha say.
Mendoza went to find him. José looked at him with the expression of someone whose despair had transformed into a dead lake where the bodies of men and dogs floated, and flies swarmed like storms. Two great lakes had formed in his eyes.
He grabbed him by the shoulders, shaking him, trying to rid himself of all the anger he had previously provoked, saying:
- The boy is alive!
José looked at him, and flies tormented the air, driven away by the wind. The smell of decay spread throughout the river because the bats were now swiftly returning to fulfill their role.
But José Iribarne embraced Mendoza; and he wept, as if trying to dry the stagnant water of his great dead lakes.

13

What was left for him? Hurtado de Mendoza wondered as he sat at the back of the cart, his legs swinging with the irregular rhythm of the wheels skipping over the cobblestones of the road. All of them—men, women, and children—were subject to the meager strength of a nag, which, like all the others he had seen lately, was used until it dropped dead. And if they didn't bury it with the same old reins it had worn for twenty or twenty-five years, because they had become embedded in the animal's mane and skin—tearing them off before would have caused it unnecessary pain, and afterward, what would be the point?—they would leave it in the middle of the road until it became a skeleton, like the one he, Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza, couldn't tear his eyes away from.

The “Juan Manuel de Rosas” was nothing more than a wooden and iron skeleton sticking out of the river waters, still smoking despite the hours that had passed since the start of the bombardment. The stern could still be seen almost undamaged, and he was sure that the bow had sunk into the bottom, preventing the rest from submerging until the wood finally broke under its own weight, and the river currents, slow, stubbornly slow like a herd of old, sick elephants, decided to carry the ship's remains in pieces southward, toward the Paraná River, which would no longer have any memory of the great ship that had sailed its waters, and which would not recognize the bloodless fragments it carried.

Bones are all the same, large or small, they have no name. Ships, when they die, are the same. They are pieces of wood, fragments of twisted iron, boilers that sink and rust. And if a letter of their name is ever uttered, when someone finds a plank with that letter, or with luck, a syllable, no one could identify it.

Who was he now? And what was left for him? He looked at his legs, tired and riddled with varicose veins. His hands, calloused and numb. His uniform had been torn to shreds, and he wore only wool trousers, his ever-present boots, and a buttonless shirt that he tried to knot, but couldn't quite cover the hair on his chest. He touched his beard, dirty and tangled from his habit of knotting the strands when he was nervous, which had become a constant lately. Long hair at the sides, and a receding hairline on the crown.

He was left with a woman he didn't want, but whom he now saw again, as many years before, vulnerable as in the days of Poland. But this time he wasn't fooled; Natasha's mask was a construct she herself didn't know how to avoid.

The men of his crew had been saved, almost miraculously, because the shelling had been relentless. There were few lifeboats, but enough, because the ship sank slowly and had given everyone time to make two or three trips to shore. Then, the lifeboats broke apart once the last man was safely ashore on the Brazilian coast.

There were dead from the battle on the beach, and some Republican soldiers appeared to arrest the ship's survivors. Domínguez spoke for the entire crew and passengers of the "Juan Manuel." He presented papers he carried in the leather folders he had salvaged from the shipwreck—the same folders in which he wrote and took notes from the books Natacha lent him. Wasn't he an Argentine spy working for the Empire, perhaps? But Mendoza wasn't surprised to discover a new facet of the corporal's personality. Be that as it may, the soldiers left them alone. They bowed to Domínguez and the captain, offered feeble apologies that were barely understandable in their language, and left.

It was already late at night. They made fires. Natacha was shivering with cold and her broken arm hurt a lot. The baby was covered with a blanket, and Iribarne held him in his arms, rocking him gently. They would have to spend the night there, Domínguez said. The nearest border post was in Bom Jesus, and it would take several hours for food and shelter to be brought to them.

The bonfires revealed the dead who hadn't been collected. Mendoza's men were circling, and he knew half of them had fled, disappearing into the jungle or following the riverbank. In Brazil, no one would look for them, neither the law nor the women they'd left behind. He only wished he could have done the same. In the middle of the night, seeing that almost everyone was asleep, exhausted, feeling the weight of Natacha's body on his shoulder, moaning painfully even in her sleep, he told himself he could get up stealthily, lay her head on the blanket that covered her, and escape. He looked toward the river, where the waters continued to gurgle around the lifeless hull of the boat. As if some freshwater monster were devouring it. He thought of the many legends Natacha had forced him to listen to,

because she loved to talk about what fascinated her, that sum of knowledge she had begun to acquire in her father's library, which he listened to like winter rain: monotonous, insistent, and always threatening. Beneath the waters, she said, live the exiled gods, and they build dead cities with the remains of the world. She had spoken to him of God in such strange, skeletal terminology that it made him wonder many times, before recent events confirmed it, whether his wife was not only mad, but perhaps possessed by a mystical delusion that Aunt Clotilde had nurtured. And she had nourished Ariel's mind and soul with all of it.

Natacha opened her eyes. She was watching him as he made stealthy movements to get up.

"Where are you going?" He had the Polish accent he hadn't used in a long time.

There was no anger, but sadness in her voice.

Natacha's eyes, those Polish eyes that were a carbon copy of Krakovsky's. The old man spoke to her through them, perhaps. He couldn't abandon her. She was lost without a man.

She heard a lullaby that Iribarne was singing in his raspy, broken voice. How different that man was now. He wasn't good, he wasn't kind, nor was he sincere. He was simply another facet of that troubled symbiosis that they all were.

He looked at the moon, vast, illuminating the shipwreck and sowing the river cemetery with dim light.

"Where could I go?" he replied, putting an arm around Natacha's shoulders and pulling her closer. She closed her eyes and surrendered to her husband's gesture.

He told her about the house in Santa Fe. They would return there. The property was now reduced to the grounds of the ranch, because everything else had been sold. She listened to the Creole voices with which he tried to lighten the harshness of the times ahead, while she answered with monosyllables in hushed Polish voices, and from afar she could hear the Andalusian lullaby that Iribarne sang with such a Spanish accent that it was as if they were on the banks of the Guadalquivir. And as background noise , songs came from the interior, perhaps from the jungle where the Brazilians who fought, men and weapons, had appeared and disappeared. A song in Portuguese where the music was not an art but a secretion of the

jungle. It sprang from the trees immersed in darkness, illuminated at their peaks by the moon, like a dark green mantle, and it was born from the beach of sand as white as the bones of the recently dead, who waited.
That?
The expiation of their souls, perhaps, in the song of the men of their land, or perhaps in the lullaby that a man - full of guilt, his soul made a crust of remorse and dissatisfaction - sang as a rite of penance and request for forgiveness.

*

Bom Jesus was a small village of numerous ranches clustered across a vast, arid grassland, curiously surrounded by water: several small lakes and the streams that connected them. All of these drained into the almost still Paranaiba River, that graveyard from which the larvae were born that, like a joy, would create the future, torrential Paraná River.
If it was hot by the river, it was even hotter in the village. Dust rose up for every reason: the hoofprints of the bay horse pulling the cart, the rickety wheels, of course, and then the running dogs that came running from the ranches when they saw them arrive.
The women and children emerged, like swarms from those broken hives that were the shacks, sometimes piled one on top of the other. The children could be seen climbing down the wooden planks, some sliding as if on toboggans. The men who worked in the streets stopped their tasks, some digging irrigation ditches, others building walls.
The cart stopped and the dogs surrounded it. There were so many of them, mostly thin and mangy, that Natacha feared they would bite them. She clung to Máximo's arm, trembling. Some had stubbornly insisted on barking at them from no more than a meter or two away. Domínguez tried

to scare them off by firing into the air, but most continued barking at them from a distance.
The women approached, drying their hands with dirty rags, or holding their children. A man with a hoe over his shoulder asked who they were.
The soldier who was driving explained it to him in Portuguese. The man spoke with the women, and they left, taking with them the boys who were willing to obey. After a while, a tall, obese old woman arrived. Except for her dress and large breasts, she had the build of a robust man, and even the hair on her face resembled a beard.
The Republican spoke to her in Portuguese. He, a little shorter than she, explained himself as if he were apologizing. She looked at him with a frown and her hands astride her hips, and then she laughed. But no one knew exactly why, whether at the misfortunes of the shipwrecked or at the stupidity of the soldiers.
Without saying a word, she gestured for them to follow her. So they followed and walked through the dust for more than two hundred meters to a ranch made of adobe with a thatched wooden roof. Inside it was cool. There were several low beds.
"This place serves as a meeting place for everything," the soldier said. "Sometimes as a hospital, sometimes for dancing. The old woman told me they'll sleep here until they can leave."
"Who is she?" Natacha asked.
-The chief of the tribe that founded this town, but few of the true Indians remain, almost all are mestizos or are from elsewhere.
"Will they bring us supplies?" Iribarne asked.
-I've already asked them.
"And when can we leave?" Natacha was tired; her voice sounded irritated and demanding.
The soldier wasn't Brazilian, maybe from Misiones, because he had spoken a lot with Domínguez during the trip to the village. He looked at her with disdain.
"Madam," he replied. "We are not your servants. Ask your captain why he wasn't carrying identification. They entered revolutionary territory and a state of war. Attack first, ask questions later—that's the motto."
The corporal tried to calm him down. They heard them speaking in Portuguese in hushed tones. Domínguez held the other man by the elbow,

in a friendly and trusting manner. The other man talked and talked, until he seemed to calm down and left the ranch.
"Corporal," Mendoza said. "I know we can't ask for what's rightfully ours, which would be compensation, but what could he have gotten for us?"
"Captain, understand that we are far from the reach of the government in Rio. These men will do what their consciences dictate. If what happened gets out, they could face a court-martial. It would be a diplomatic incident and a likely new war with Brazil. Nobody wants that. I was told they will take you wherever you want, with supplies and everything you need."
For the rest of the day and until the following afternoon they rested and ate. Several Black women brought them food and water to drink and wash with. A midwife came and, without asking, took the baby and put it to her breast. Iribarne let her do it, sitting on a broken log, smoking.
- What is the boy's name? -she asked.
"Maximilian," replied José.
The captain and Natacha looked up when they heard.
"I didn't know he'd already been baptized." Mendoza tried to be ironic, but it didn't work.
"It's not because of you, Captain. You're not the center of the universe, even if you think so. I named it after the dog that saved you. But the story behind that name is older..."
Mendoza remembered when Altea had named the dog and told him the legend of Maximilian and the queen.
- Did Altea ever tell you that story?
- What story?
-The one about the dog Maximilian who killed a queen, or something like that... Altea said that Max had reminded her of that legend.
"I don't know what you're talking about. I named my boy that out of pure sentimentality, and I'm quite proud of that weakness. I don't know, it just occurred to me. Make whatever associations you like, Captain, if that puts your mind at ease."
Iribarne's face was hidden behind the smoke from the pipe, but Mendoza could see that with one eye he was watching the midwife feeding the boy, and with the other he was looking at him sarcastically.

The following morning, they were informed that the cart was ready to take the captain and his wife to the shore. A Brazilian barge was waiting for them.
"Have a good trip," the corporal told them.
Bernardo had climbed onto the cart, carrying a bundle of his belongings slung over his shoulder. Mendoza didn't know what to do with him. They were going to Santa Fe, and who knew what state of neglect the remaining part of the ranch would be in. And he remembered what Dr. Ruiz had asked him to do.
"Corporal...listen carefully to what I'm going to ask of you. I know it's not your duty to take on this responsibility, but I need you to be Bernardo's protector, just as Farías was yours. Take him to Buenos Aires, and if you can, send him to school and then to medical school. You'll already know something about his history. And make sure he respects his father's memory, because perhaps in a few years the spite of politics will change its mind and turn on someone else."
Dominguez could do nothing but make the boy get down and grab his hand.
"I will do my best, Captain, to be more than your protector, your mentor. But I promise you nothing regarding political matters."
They shook hands, and the corporal and the boy walked away toward the horse he had ready to leave for some errand he might still have to complete. He helped the boy mount, and then himself. Bernardo held onto the corporal's belt, and the horse set off slowly, kicking up dust with its hooves.
Iribarne ran towards the cart, and said, panting:
- Are they leaving without saying goodbye?
Mendoza had helped Natacha up and turned around. He said reluctantly:
"I didn't think it was necessary, Iribarne. I believe there shouldn't be anything more between us if we want to preserve peace."
Iribarne laughed obsequiously. He was clearly happy, and Maximiliano's possession was the reason. Something, however, seemed to cloud the joy on his face, but that was no longer Máximo Hurtado de Mendoza's concern. From now on, the captain would only be an old man who would perhaps steer a barge to transport merchandise, Black people, and prostitutes from one town to another along the coast.

"It was a pleasure to meet you," said Iribarne, extending his hand, which Mendoza shook listlessly.
"It was a pleasure, madam," he said to Natasha, leaning in to kiss her hand. She extended it gracefully, regaining the distinction she knew had always separated them. And she said something in Polish.
Mendoza couldn't help but laugh, not so much at what she said, but at Iribarne's expression upon hearing it. He hadn't understood her, of course, but it was clear he'd grasped the meaning from her tone and expression. She didn't deign to look at him again, but continued smiling, unable to suppress weak chuckles as the cart moved away from the village road where Iribarne remained, standing there with his pipe in one hand, pondering what that Polish lady—perhaps mad, certainly strange—had said to him, hiding behind a language she knew he didn't understand.
"What nerve the countess has!" he said aloud.
But as he turned to return to the ranch, he told himself that it was entirely his fault if he didn't know Polish. His son would know everything when he grew up, he thought, satisfied. He would stop worrying about women's lies and whims, and would dedicate himself to teaching Maximilian that the world is like a country under siege.

*

"The boy is sick," the old woman told him when he returned to the ranch. She already knew something was wrong, which is why she had kept him away from the others and hadn't said anything, lest they take him away. But she had noticed something the day before. The boy was irritated, scratching himself, and his skin was somewhat reddened in certain areas, with pinkish patches.
José grabbed the old woman's arms. Maximiliano wept softly and quietly, and perhaps that's why the others hadn't noticed. As if the boy knew he had to keep the secret to stay with his father. That thought satisfied him; it

was clear that God or fate had brought them together, and that this would prevent the evil that afflicted him from becoming serious. He paused for a moment, astonished by his own thoughts: he was speaking like Manuel the priest, or like Mara the witch. Both had been what they hadn't been able to be, but that something seeped through and surfaced in their ways of thinking and speaking. Only he, José Menéndez Iribarne, had always been what he believed himself to be, inside and out, a disbeliever who trusted only what he saw: the body and desire. And now, however, superstitious thoughts arose in his mind, thoughts that had no basis whatsoever.
"So what?" he asked old Agatha, that tomboyish old woman who devoted time to the boy for some reason he couldn't quite grasp. Among so many people in town who needed her, she would stay for hours looking after him. José had let her do it, because he knew it was necessary, but also because it diverted attention and eased the worries of others. But now that they were gone, Maximiliano was solely his, and the old woman a necessary nuisance.
Agatha had a mix of imprecise ancestry. She boasted of being the last descendant of an indigenous aristocracy, but she had mestizo or mulatto features in her skin tone, and José recognized in the shape of her broken cheekbones a resemblance to the men of Aragon. Her accent was confusing and sometimes unintelligible, and she often mumbled to herself or spoke under her breath. Prayers? That's what he had thought at first. Spells? They couldn't be ruled out.
"A mae sufferu muito," she said.
José nodded.
-He will also suffer.
"Don't be such a pessimist, old woman. The boy's just sick, isn't that common at his age? And with everything that's happened..."
He wrapped him in the colorful wool blanket the old woman had brought him, but Maximiliano was sweating. He had a fever, and José knew he was worse than the day before, and that he could die.
- Is there a doctor in the village?
The old woman approached.
"Don't touch it anymore!" he told her. He didn't want to follow the path Mara and Valverde had led him down lately. He no longer trusted dark

paths where meanings were double and things were different from what they seemed.
The bats were indeed there. They were always there, he always saw them with their black wings and heard them with their flapping, like despair. The old woman stood with her arm half-extended, now still in the air, as if she were holding back something invisible, or giving a blessing. Always those two inseparable states, she told herself. Ambivalence was a curse. She then spoke in a deep, masculine voice, and her facial features seemed to darken in the hair that made her resemble a black slave recently brought on a ship from Africa.
- Estava nas áquas, nao étruee?
-Yes, what about that?
-The water is suffering. He is sown.
José didn't understand.
Does the water suffer, or suffer within the water? What does it remember? And what does water have to do with it if that town was drier than a desert? Perhaps that's why? Does the desert remember the water of the river, so near and yet so far?
The foolishness of an old woman who thought herself more than she was, boasting of a past that was nothing more than a product of stagnant, unhealthy waters, like that river that began there. And what was she, or he, perhaps? A symbiosis of indeterminate races and genders. Or perhaps that was precisely why she constituted what used to be called the All?
- Is there a doctor, you old hag?
Agatha filled the ranch air with a breath heavy with insults. Finally she said:
-Or French.
And he went out, leaving open the piece of leather that hung on the doorframe. In the light, he saw Agatha walking by in her threadbare skirt, which looked like a membrane, sometimes folded back on itself, like two wings that could open at any moment. But it didn't happen, or perhaps he didn't want to see. He turned his eyes away from that sight and fixed them on the feverish boy.
He went out in search of the one they called the Frenchman. He asked everyone he saw around the ranch, and then wandered through what seemed like town streets but were nothing more than uncertain spaces

between the ranches and shacks. Some didn't answer him, others didn't know him, and those who did didn't know where he lived. He came across a kind of general store, which was nothing more than a room with four tables, a few chairs, and a counter with bottles, behind which a woman was leaning on her elbows. When she saw him enter with the boy in his arms, she said:

-Look at the knight...

José remembered that Mara had called him something similar when they first met.

- Procure or French?

- Are all the people in this town witches?

-Something like that- he replied.

- And do they live on air?

-Something like that, or Gonçalvez, we know.

The woman, disheveled and with dirty hands, served him a drink.

"Are you looking for me?" someone said from behind him.

He was a blond man with long, straight hair, a stubble beard, and such intense blue eyes that they contrasted sharply with the dimness of the ranch. He was the Frenchman, of course.

-Yes sir.

The other one shook his hand.

-Comment puis-je vou servir? Pardon, but when I see someone different from these black people I think I'm with someone civilized and my head speaks French.

He liked that boasting, that dignity which was nothing more than vanity, but it had been a long time since he had encountered that kind of noble pride.

-My boyfriend is sick, he has a fever.

The Frenchman looked at the baby's face, pulling back the blanket slightly.

-Sein, pardon, but you are trompé. Je suis vétérinaire.

He wondered if everyone in that town was making fun of him.

-I'll buy you a drink, Monsieur José. Let's sit at that table in the corner, si vous plais.

-I don't have time to waste with a crooked priest...

As he was leaving, the Frenchman grabbed him by the arm.

-Pensez, sein. Je suis lo único más parecido a un médico en veinte leguas. Y este infant, ca va mourir.
José's face was a picture of despair, and the Frenchman noticed. They set off together toward the ranch. They walked under the sun, which hadn't been seen since he'd arrived in town, because the clouds were constant, but it made its presence felt with the heat and the flies.
The first thing the veterinarian did when they arrived was close the windows and light a cigar he took from his jacket pocket. He was wearing an old cardigan, so long it looked like a coat, and his trousers were a kind of denim jacket with the cuffs tucked into two tall boots. He lit the cigar, but didn't smoke it; instead, he left it on the table, and soon the smoke scared away the flies.
"It's a shame to waste them, but what brings us pleasure frightens them. That's why they come when we can no longer defend ourselves." Then he carried the baby to the crib the old woman had improvised. "I see Agatha's been meddling around here; I hope I didn't let her work her spells."
-I don't know what he did because I don't even know what he is…
The Frenchman laughed.
-Between us, Monsieur, the old woman was a very attractive boss when she was young, she had many children and her grandchildren are around here, any of those you have seen could be one of them.
-You mean that…
-I said so. But he comes from a family of witch doctors, or healers, whatever you want to call them… I don't know the reasons, though we can imagine them. These tribes were matriarchal, and the men were raised by women. Who knows, it's said that several of his brothers are also his children, and all sorts of combinations you can imagine… And they even say…
The Frenchman undressed the boy and began to examine him. He took out a device shaped like a wooden cone and placed one end against Maximiliano's chest, and put his ear to the other end. After a while, he said: "He's agitated, of course, it's the fever. Who knows how long his heart has been like this? Was he born by cesarean? Was his mother ill? I've heard something about that..."
The boy received excellent care during the pregnancy; the mother was in a sort of coma. But he was born healthy, Dr. Gonçalves said…

-I already know those gravediggers, they own many towns in Brazil.
-No, the one I'm talking about was a doctor…
-That's what I mean, Monsieur. And then what?
- Then what? We were attacked, the boy almost drowned…
- Was it in contaminated water?
-I suppose so, those by the river, but we were all there, do you mean that…?
-That's right, children this age don't have immune systems. Their own blood generates them when they're exposed to an infection, but not all of them go through what he's gone through.
What can be done…? I don't know your name…
The Frenchman extended his hand again, introducing himself.
-Renaud Dergan, veterinarian at Her Majesty's Royal Stables.
He saw the displeasure on José's face.
"Don't worry, the horses and dogs were better cared for than the townspeople, I assure you. I came here a few months ago after the 1985 revolution. I fell out of favor with the king when the monarchy was restored. I disliked so many changes, and look, the same thing is happening here..."
He looked around and lit an oil lamp. He held it up to the table and took a magnifying glass from his pocket. He examined the boy's eyes, which were now calm, almost asleep. And that was what was worrying. He moved from one eye to the other, and then examined the left one again.
- What's happening?
-Monsieur José. You have a waterborne infection; it entered through the mucous membranes of your mouth and nose. The skin lesions are localized, but they aren't helping; in fact, they're making it worse… and there's something else I don't understand…
José waited. The Frenchman scratched his blond beard with the handle of the magnifying glass.
"I think the infection has spread to the meninges. Look, newborns have immature membranes, and there are even openings that remain open for several years. The meninges, Monsieur..." He realized that José didn't understand. "Meningitis."
-Be clear, Dergan. Are you going to die?

-If he doesn't die, he could become an invalid, Monsieur José. Or blind, perhaps.
José sat down.
"Save him," he said. "I won't allow the boy to be anything less than what he deserves to be. He's a Menéndez Iribarne..."
"Monsieur, I understand your sorrow, but if you want a sorcerer, go to Agatha," he said, taking the still-lit cigar and putting it to his lips. He approached the door, leaning against the frame and looking outside as he smoked. Suddenly he laughed.
"What are you laughing at, doctor?" - the last word was an insult.
-They say that Agatha had children…
-He already told me.
"But when she was already a woman, you understand? She got pregnant several times. Several were stillborn, but a few are still around. Some in wheelchairs, others tied to the bed. They're like monsters, I've seen them, Monsieur. I can't be sure they're her children, of course; birth defects are very common here."
-That's why they trust you, doctor, they're like animals, aren't they?
-Je t'accorde la victorie, mensieur.

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From that day on, Renaud stayed at the ranch. They came looking for him several times to treat some animals, but since he refused, the rumor of what he was doing there must have spread through the town, and they never returned.
José was cooking in the small iron oven he'd had brought from the general store. The woman's name was Lucía Santos, and she'd taken a liking to him the moment she saw him come in with a baby in his arms. It wasn't common to see a man like that. So, whenever he went to buy something, they'd stay and chat, and she'd give him drinks without charging him. One night, they went into the room through the door behind the counter. He'd

thought it was the bathroom, and it served that purpose too, since only a couple of planks separated the bed from the latrine next to it. When she undressed, he realized she was older than he'd thought.
"How old are you, Lucia?" he asked her after they had made love. There were no sheets or blankets. They were both naked on the old mattress.
-Eu acho que você era un cavalheiro.
-Damn, I'm a man...
She climbed on top of him and said, smiling:
-Percebi.
Then she began to tell him her life story, just as Mara had. He resigned himself to listening because, as she spoke, she rubbed her body against his. She was forty years old and had had a child at thirteen. But Gaspar, like his father, was a scoundrel. That was the expression she used. José thought it was very mild, considering what he later learned, but it was typical of a woman like her. Capable of not depending on a man to support herself, but incapable of living without one. She still visited the man who had impregnated her at thirteen; from time to time, she went to the prison where he was serving a life sentence.
- And who did he kill?
-Muito...
When her son grew up, he helped her at the general store, but it wasn't work for him. He wanted to find wealthy women, so he went to Bahia, to Sao Paulo, to Rio. And he hooked up with one from a good family. He never told her what had happened to him. The woman died, perhaps from a miscarriage, or maybe Gaspar killed her. The point is, her son went to Argentina. Since then, she hasn't heard anything about him.
José got dressed and saw the oven in the room, dilapidated.
- Can I borrow that?
She shrugged and asked him when he was coming back. He did the same.
- Did you like the minha buceta?
He kissed her vagina, old but not overused, and that's why he liked it. He grabbed the oven and left. He could taste his own semen on his tongue after kissing her.

At night he would prepare something for the Frenchman and himself, and he would warm the milk they brought for Maximiliano. They gave it to him

to drink in lukewarm spoonfuls, exactly ten spoonfuls every four hours. It was the only remedy the Frenchman had prescribed. He would sit beside the crib, which was simply a box, his head resting on one arm and his elbow on the edge. He would think, and sometimes he would doze. José paced the room, trying to calm his nerves by doing things: cooking something, washing the boy's sheets and blankets, going to the general store to get something, and dealing with those who kept asking about the veterinarian. Old Agatha had returned two or three times. She would come in without knocking and appear beside the crib. She would exchange a few phrases in Portuguese with Dergan. She would act offended, say something gently, though, and then leave.

"What did he say?" José would ask when he couldn't overcome his curiosity.

-Any homeopathic advice? He's interested in children; they say that was one of the reasons for his transformation. He wasn't content with just fathering children; he wanted to conceive.

"Nonsense," said Iribarne. "What do you think of Maximilian?"

Several days had passed. The fever had subsided, but the boy's legs and arms were limp. And his eyes were blind.

"I don't think he'll survive," Dergan replied. "I recommend you pray, since you Spaniards are so devout. Because of the Inquisition and all that, I mean."

She didn't notice the sarcasm, only the advice. She thought of Manuel, the son destined for the priesthood. She remembered his father's anger and his mother's disappointment when he told them he was marrying Altea, a foreigner. Why did he do it? she wondered when his parents wrote to tell them of their brother's decision. What was he running from? Because there was no other word to define that decision. If for anyone else taking holy orders was fleeing the world, for the Menéndez Iribarne family destined for the Church it was the opposite: accepting reality. Manuel, however, had taken refuge in marriage. He loved Altea as much as he thought he loved her. The truth of that feeling lay in the reasoning he used to explain it. Manuel's passion was Christ. Natacha had hinted at this when they spoke while caring for Altea. José knew that Manuel had worshipped him as both man and God. He was his older brother, like José. He was his protector, like José. He was the one who asked for nothing in return, only what he wanted

to give him, like José? Manuel felt he had to give everything in return for all of that: the responsibility he had taken on demanded it.
Duty had become desire.
That night, while Dergan slept on the makeshift mattress they had set up, José knelt beside the crib. He placed his hands, fingers interlaced, on the sheet. He felt the dampness of the boy's urine, of the milk that had spilled from the corner of his lips.
He prayed, but he wasn't speaking to Christ, but to Manuel. His brother was stubbornly abandoning him: first marriage, then his flight to America, then his death, and now this second death. What God created had to die because His immortality surpassed any of His creations: it had even happened to His own Son. But what man created was immortal because he would never see, or shouldn't see, the death of his creatures. For the father, children are immortal. And that was Maximiliano: his creation. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Roles exchanged like in a play so the actors would never tire of their characters.
The cross.
She touched the cross she wore hanging on her chest. She took it off and put it on Maximiliano. It was too big for him, so much so that it covered the boy's entire chest down to his stomach.
Such was his prayer.
A stolen cross.

Agatha came back in the early hours. She was carrying a wooden box. Inside, she heard the sound of glass clinking as she placed it on the table. She shook the Frenchman, who was curled up on the straw mattress. Dergan opened his eyes, got up, went to urinate, came back, and washed his face. He saw the box she was pointing to, nodded, took her hand, and kissed it like in the old days at court.
José watched all this from the chair beside the cradle. His back ached, but he peered around, feigning doze with half-closed eyelids. He saw the old woman curtsy, and almost betrayed himself when he couldn't suppress a smile. She looked so ridiculous, in her whore's clothes, curtsying like that. Both were remnants of an empire, offspring, monsters of bygone dynasties. Yet the ludicrous naiveté with which they performed this pantomime was

merely a facade, for behind it lay a profound symbolic meaning, and this meaning was serious, even true.
Dergan opened the box and took out the bottles, arranging them on the table. It was a whole pharmacopoeia, which the old woman explained in whispers to the Frenchman. He would lift a bottle and peer at the color and density of its contents. She would approach, and they would look together, backlit by the light. She was as tall as he was, but her feminine movements contrasted with her hairy face. After a long while, he chose three bottles, taking his time deciding on the third. They discussed it briefly, in very low voices, glancing occasionally toward José. They spoke in Portuguese; Iribarne was finding it harder to understand this language than French. However, the hospital charade made everything clear. Then she left, once again erect and without bowing. She was no longer the lady of the court interested in chemical studies that she had to conceal from the prudish eyes of a closed society, but the witch from an indigenous village in Brazil, a desert surrounded by jungles. As she left, the shouts of the boys who surrounded her could be heard.
It was already dawn. The Frenchman heated water on the fire and waited squatting, looking at the flasks in his hands.
"What's that?" Iribarne asked, startling him, speaking from the corner where he was urinating. Then he approached, buttoning his pants, and then stretched with a long yawn. He put his hands on his waist and tried to stretch.
"I'll give you something for that," said the Frenchman. He brought him a powder which he dissolved in the coffee he had just finished preparing.
"What are those jars?" he asked again.
-Something to fight the infection. How did the boy fare last night?
-Asleep, and so still that sometimes I thought he had died.
They approached the crib. Dergan examined him and took his temperature. He had a somber expression on his face.
-It's worse, isn't it?
-Oui. I will prepare the medicine.
It took him two hours to mix the correct doses from the bottles. He used a dropper to measure, but several times he had to discard it and start over. José watched him do this while covering Maximiliano with cloths to bring down his fever, but he only reacted when he felt the cold and then went

back to sleep. He didn't cry, he barely moved. When he opened his eyes, they were gray like two windows onto a winter sky.
After midday, the Frenchman approached with a syringe without a needle and placed the end between the boy's lips. He slowly released the preparation. It almost always spilled from the corner of his lips, but he did manage to swallow some.
"What did he give you?" Suddenly, he realized that his question carried a hint of distrust. He grabbed the Frenchman by his clothes and said:
- What are you and the old woman in the dress up to?
Dergan couldn't help but laugh, and his breath flooded José's face.
- What are you laughing at?
-From you, my friend, and from the ignorance behind which you stubbornly hide.
Then José let go and went to look at the box. The three jars were empty on the table. He opened the box and saw the rest, but what he hadn't noticed before was that the inside was lined with leather, or was it skin? And that some jars contained not liquid, but pieces or splinters of bone, and others small corpuscles that made him think of embryos.
He turned to look at Dergan, who was behind him with his hands resting on José's shoulders. He liked this intimacy, because suddenly they both shared something that didn't need to be said: the cold hut in the green desert, the boy they were taking care of, the smell of the medicine, and the woman who came and went with her symbiosis of exchanged sexes.
José Iribarne had understood. There are no gods, perhaps, in the form and conception in which he and Manuel had been taught. Those were the ways of the Church, civilized and well-mannered, which meant nothing more than forms and manners. Beneath the church lie the cemeteries, and within their contents the alchemy of life and death unfolded.
Fetuses, pieces of dead children, of unborn children, of abortions, of those sacrificed in the river, of sacrificial amputations, of remains of bonfires, of cut muscles, of excised uteruses, of blood clots, pieces of intestines, broken bones, split skulls, and the iron mass of the brain, with its content of infinite time and space, made into a homogeneous mass, malleable and submissive to the force of the fingers of man-woman-man who transformed himself at will: like a God born from the earth, begotten with water and sap, the skeleton formed with splinters of ancient bones, adhered one by

one with saliva and secured with ivy that slowly transformed into integuments: skin, nails, hair.
The man-woman-man of flesh, the woman-man-woman of vegetable.
The symbiosis built with alchemy and surgical instruments.
What was the Frenchman showing him now?
Dergan took out of the box a short rod, made of silver metal, only slightly thicker than a needle.
"Is it one of their killing tools?" asked José.
Dergan smiled; Iribarne's sarcasm no longer bothered him. He appreciated him for that and for all the time they had spent together: those few nights keeping vigil by the crib. And for the task they had assigned themselves.
He no longer spoke French, except for his accent, nor did he seem to make any effort with his Spanish. Appearances were fading, ashamed of their inadequacy. He put an arm around José's shoulders and led him to the crib.
"Look," she said, crouching down over Maximiliano and opening his eyelids. "He's blind."
-Like her mother. Gonçalvez said that, even so, she could see.
Those gravediggers know about life because they know about death. There are many forms of blindness, just as there are many forms of death. Some of them one can recover from.
- And what do you think?
-We'll wait until tonight. If his fever doesn't go down, I'll operate.

During the afternoon they sat on either side of the crib, sometimes with their arms crossed, or elbows on their knees and heads resting in their hands, or one leg crossed over the other. They always glanced at each other from time to time. The Frenchman's clear and luminous thoughts could be read in Dergan's green eyes. The Spaniard's convoluted and tragic thoughts surfaced and slipped away along treacherous paths.
When one went out for a walk under the sun surrounded by clouds, surrounded by the pearly reflection of every day in that town of Bom Jesus, the other remained inside, pacing from one wall to another, turning over thoughts, as if exploring the inner face of a skull the cartography of the species: the furrows of the river-veins, the valleys of blood, the mountains of dead tissue, the plains of depression, the dense jungles of the unexplored: the hidden in mudflats and swamps: the region from which one

only returns in the form of fantastic hallucinations: the unconscious as a baroque architecture made of bones buried in sand.
Night fell and found them together in silence. One stood sterilizing the metal rod in boiling water. The other washed Maximiliano's naked body with warm water and soap.
The Frenchman's hands, encased in fine cloth gloves, prepared the surgical kit. Iribarne's hands caressed the skin as he wrapped him in clean cloths after cutting his fine hair, leaving his head white and bald. José smiled at the boy as he spoke to him in an incomprehensible murmur. He realized he was speaking in Latin: the blessings they used to give in their house in Cádiz every day and every night. The rites of torture were the same as those of the blessing.
Outside it was dark, and the murmur of many voices rose into a single, harmonious chorus of anxieties, like a litany. The hut was illuminated by the twelve lamps that Agatha had brought that afternoon, lighting them and arranging them around the table on which they had placed Maximilian. Iribarne didn't know exactly what the Frenchman was going to do. He had explained it to him meticulously during the afternoon, drawing anatomical diagrams with an accuracy that belied his status as a simple small-town veterinarian.
“Newborns have soft bones,” he had told her. His face lit up like a Sorbonne professor teaching philosophy, but he was more than that, because he was explaining the conditions of flesh. “Especially those of the skull. Because they are growing so rapidly, the sutures that join them are open so they slide almost like the landmasses of the continents over the lava of the world.”
The Frenchman's voice captivated him like a fine wine sipped slowly throughout the night. Beneath his voice, anatomy wasn't just paper and pencil, but a journey through hospital and morgue corridors, sometimes brightly lit, sometimes dimly lit, filled with the cold fumes of medicine and formaldehyde, with echoes of voices that were sometimes the laughter of nurses and the shouts of doctors, other times the groans of the sick. And also the noises of the corridors: the squeaking wheels of gurneys, things falling, stumbling heels, engines starting and stopping without rhythm, and in the silence of the middle of the night, the hiss of escaping oxygen tubes,

which fled whenever possible to prevent men from breathing, as if it were a bad habit that humankind should banish from its body forever.
-There are two openings, mon cherie. They're called fontanelles, one anterior and one posterior. We'll enter through one of them.
Although he was the only one speaking, in that impromptu class he addressed an audience larger than his sole listener within the confines of their space. José guessed that Ágata was behind the door, surely listening, and behind her, an entire town admiring his eloquence.
Maximiliano was no longer moving. He looked like a corpse, except for the pinkish color of his skin and the profuse sweat that exhausted him.
"What do I have to do?" asked José. His hairy hands were trembling slightly.
-Hand me the instrument I ask for, dry the perspiration from my face from time to time, and hold the boy steady, in case he moves.
- Will it hurt, Lee?
"He's not comatose, of course not. In any case, he might only be bothered by the incision in his skin, but once it's inside his skull he won't feel a thing."
Dergan washed his hands thoroughly for ten minutes and told the boy to do the same. Ten minutes passed in silence and averted glances. Then they put on gloves, and Dergan picked up a scalpel. He barely pricked the skin of the skull above the forehead, at the junction of the frontal and parietal bones. Blood flowed, and he wiped it away. He placed the scalpel back in the box and took the metal rod, which had one blunt end and one pointed end. He inserted the pointed end into the incision slowly, watching the boy's face.
José watched, standing on the other side to hold him if he moved, but it was like having a rag doll in his hands.
Renaud Dergan continued his meticulous work, advancing so slowly in depth that it was as if he were moving a thousandth of a millimeter at a time. A drop of sweat fell onto the boy's face, and Dergan glared at José. Iribarne wiped the Frenchman's forehead. He would no longer be careless or interrupt the concentration of this man who was delving into the brain of a newborn. What future was he destroying, what deaths was he preventing, and what talents was he diminishing? Would he have to carry an invalid for

the rest of his days? Blind, deaf, and mute, and completely immobilized? A living corpse like a cross on his back?
And suddenly he thought of Manuel, of the cross of his absent soul in the church of Cádiz. He would carry his brother's cross on his own shoulders, even if the flapping of invisible bats deafened him and made him lose his way. He knew that the road to Calvary was always the same, and the Stations of the Cross were always the same length. The problem was time, so exquisitely variable that it could drive one to madness.
That was what was happening now. The night outside, filled with the murmurs of children that sometimes sounded like crickets, sometimes like owls, sometimes like toads. Inside, the light from the twelve lamps surrounded by countless moths cast enormous shadows on the walls. And those shadows passed over the table where Maximiliano sat. Like the flapping of bats' wings.
The Frenchman spoke. He said something in his language, an insult, perhaps. But there was joy on his face.
A clear liquid began to seep from the incision, trickling and dripping onto the table. It then turned pink and then red.
Dergan moved the stylet slightly to the left. He had been told it should reach the roof of the orbit, where he believed the infection had accumulated.
Minutes passed, or perhaps seconds; he'd lost all track of time. The stiletto was more than halfway in, and suddenly Maximiliano opened his eyes. They were still blind, his gaze unfocused, but for a moment he thought they were looking at him. He was so absorbed in that strange expression that he only noticed too late that pus was oozing from the wound. It smelled mildly sweet, and Dergan let the liquid flow until it was gone.
It flowed and trickled down his skull, behind his ears and toward the nape of his neck. José wanted to clean it up, but Dergan said no. He wanted to do something to hide the trembling of his hands. He had killed and torn apart bodies and souls in his life, but Maximiliano's body was unlike anything he had ever known. He wasn't an angel, of course, nor was he a young animal. He was a mere object beyond the comprehension of his fingers. He had tried to understand him with his touch because he hadn't been able to penetrate him with his eyes, but he couldn't understand him in either way. Not even his crying explained it, and the smell of the boy's secretions was

simply a sign of animality. Only once, when he brought his lips to Maximiliano's forehead to feel his fever, did his tongue touch the boy's skin, and he thought he saw something that he would later begin to understand, and only many years later, perhaps, would he fully understand, like someone who sees a city completely built: the foundations and the pinnacles of buildings as beautiful as towers of steel and glass. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't see anything through the mirrored windows.
The liquid stopped flowing. The Frenchman cleaned and plugged the hole. He bandaged Maximilian's head and said:
-J'ai fini.
The boy had closed his eyes again, but his left eye was slightly half-closed. Dergan took off his gloves and washed his hands. He looked worried.
- What's happening?
-Just as I expected, the sphenoid offered resistance.
-I don't understand...
-Sometimes, to heal a bone, you have to break it.

During the following days, Maximiliano would wake up and move around in varying states of agitation. He would cry for hours and convulse, but according to Dergan, this was simply a normal overstimulation of the nervous system. Three times a day, Dergan checked him and assessed his reflexes. Sometimes the boy would remain still for an entire day, and Dergan would check the reflex in his left eye. He would scratch his head, as if something didn't quite fit in his anatomical puzzle.
"The vision is very good. Look, my dear, how it follows the direction of the beam of light." With the handheld lantern, she moved from side to side, and Maximilian's eyes faithfully followed them.
- So what worries you?
"He should have some aftereffects, some sign of his illness. I'm not saying he should be disabled in some way, but these prolonged and varied changes in his nervous system don't coincide with a complete lack of symptoms. Everything indicates he's fine, but his system fluctuates from one state to another for no apparent reason. As if his body isn't content with any state, neither stillness nor excitement. He can't find his balance. And all of this, it seems to me..." The Frenchman scratched his beard

vigorously, searching for answers. "...has to do with the vestibular system on the left side. Perhaps the infection spread to the parietal bone, and I was relieved to drain the supraorbital region."
He made loud noises next to each of Maximiliano's ears, covering the other one in turn. Both had the right answers.
-There are no signs of deafness.
He picked him up and held him sitting in the cradle. Maximiliano looked from one side to the other, turning his head, and even smiled for a moment. But if he let go of him even slightly, he would fall to the left.

This condition lasted two full weeks. The episodes of overexcitement occurred every eight to ten hours, and then he slept the rest of the time. Afterward, the intervals became shorter and therefore more frequent; however, the outbursts were less intense and his sleep less deep. He was very thin, and because he ate and drank so little, since they couldn't get him to swallow, they feared he would die of malnutrition. He had no fever, and his senses were fully responsive.
One day, almost a month later, Maximiliano was sitting in his cradle while José held him. Dergan signaled for him to put him down. The boy remained upright, but raised an arm and pointed ahead at an indistinct spot in the hut. They both looked, but saw nothing. Maximiliano was now shouting angrily and fearfully, pointing at the wall. But the wall was obscured by the roof and the shadow of the door.
José was intrigued and went to investigate, carrying a lamp. He then saw the Altea cross hanging on the wall. Neither of them could see it from their distance. Dergan examined the boy's eyes again. He tested it by placing various objects near and far away, but Maximiliano only responded to the cross.
The next day the Frenchman spoke to old Agatha about it. She placed a hand over the boy's face and closed her eyes.
-Eu vejo o que ele ve.
-Què s que c'est?
-All.
Then she picked him up and began to rock him. She was crying and holding him close to her neck.

By the end of July, Maximiliano had grown, and his sleep lapses had normalized. He slept a lot, but his waking hours were peaceful, and he only cried if he was hungry. They tested his eyes, but they showed no further normal responses. However, when he stared straight ahead, it was as if he were searching for something he had lost. He would turn his head from side to side. At first, this seemed to cause him distress, and he would fall asleep restless, but then he seemed to have forgotten all about it.
The Frenchman, after reviewing it for a day, said:
-There is a spot on the retina of the left eye.
"So what?" asked Iribarne, who had just returned from speaking with one of the men at the general store. He had been looking for someone to take him to Rio, and he had found him.
-It's a sign of certain aftereffects of infections or fractures. Internal scarring, you understand?
- So you no longer see what you used to see?
-See what we all see, mon cherie.

*

One winter day, in the first week of August, it was raining and the land was a mass of mud in which carts sank, old dogs got stuck and died from stones thrown by the boys, and even the scythe of death seemed to be drawn like a black rainbow in the sky.
José Menéndez Iribarne chose that day to leave. He had planned a long itinerary, unsure if he could complete it, but he would try, overcoming any obstacles. First, the man at the general store would take him by cart to the nearest town where he could find a train station. After leaving the last station, he would travel by boat along the navigable rivers, and then again by train and cart. Where he couldn't travel by train, he would buy a horse and ride the entire distance to Rio de Janeiro.

That day, very early, he packed a light suitcase and put Maximiliano in a harness with a backpack that Lucía had given him. She had carried her son Gaspar that way and still had it. José repaired and reinforced it.
Maximiliano remained calm as he gazed up at the overcast sky.
"Bad day to travel, dear," said Lucia, who had come to see him off.
The Frenchman watched him from the ranch doorway, with his hands in his pockets and his pipe in his lips.
"Don't worry," he said, and kissed her. He watched her walk away, her arms wrapped around a wet wool shawl.
The Frenchman approached.
- Why not wait for better weather?
Because winter in Spain is harsher than here, and I hope to arrive before it starts. Besides, I have nothing to do around here. I've had enough of America for a long time. I miss Spain, and I don't want the boy to grow up there.
They hugged, and the Frenchman gave her two kisses as was his custom, one on each cheek.
"I'm going on a trip, my dear. I'll miss your bad temper." He slapped her on the bottom as José turned around.
-Goodbye, quack and beast-chaser. May the dogs bite you and you die of rabies.
The Frenchman's laughter did not stop until he saw the cart drive away and disappear under the drizzle and fog.
José looked back several times, until he lost sight of the ranch and the people at the door, the Frenchman, and a little further away, old Agatha, surrounded by so many boys that as he walked away, they seemed to grow like a great lake of black heads born from mud.
The trip was too long.
Throughout Minas Gerais, he encountered the Gonçalvez surname in almost every town, and everyone mentioned them. Taking advantage of the name Estanislao, they gave him shelter when they otherwise would have refused him, or lent him money from the few banks to continue his journey. Several sections of the railway were in poor condition, and the locomotive stopped every fifteen minutes on what should have been a five-hour journey, stretching to almost a day. Then there was the need to transfer to cross several rivers. He passed many miners who went to work before

dawn and returned just after nightfall. They were silent men who accompanied him as he rode along with the backpack and the boy. They looked at him curiously, because it wasn't common to see a man of Iribarne's stature carrying a newborn, alone and without a wife. With them were their children, their skin blackened and their legs bent. They listened to their parents' conversation and occasionally glanced at the baby.
More than twenty days later they arrived in Rio de Janeiro. They entered riding a mule that had been sold to them a hundred leagues earlier, and which was dying of old age. He saw the vegetation along the bay, and the enormous rocks that formed Brazil, with two huge humps on its back. But the bay faced the ocean.
He walked through the streets to the port, because he had left the mule untied so that someone would find it dead. He walked with a suitcase in one hand, and the other resting on Maximiliano's back.
There were many boats anchored, others setting sail for night fishing, and still others returning and lowering their nets. But he didn't see any ships. He inquired at the windows of one of the port's tall, imperial-style buildings, its ceilings adorned with cupids and caryatids supporting the columns. He approached a window with colonial-style grilles, where an old man was counting tickets at a desk. The man glanced up once as he approached, then continued counting, occasionally wetting his finger with his tongue to help him advance the tickets.
-Excuse me, I wanted to know when the next ship sails to Cadiz.
The old man answered without looking at him.
"One just set sail yesterday..." He stopped what he was doing, took a huge, heavy logbook from the shelf behind the desk, and consulted page after page for a while.
-The next one arrives in about fifteen days from Spain, and sets sail a week later for the return trip.
- Which port?
"Are you making fun of me? Didn't you tell me about Cádiz? I've been seeing them come and go for thirty years...there's some real character," she said then in a low voice, putting the book away.
-Excuse me, it's just that it's been so long since I left there, and I've been through so much...

-I'm not your shoulder to cry on, sir, go cry in a church and don't waste my time.
He resumed his counting: finger, tongue, paper, in that order and without hesitation.
José stood there, frozen. He looked like a country bumpkin lost in the middle of the big city. But he would soon return to Spain and be who he once was.
Excuse me again, I don't mean to bother you, but I'd like to book a ticket for that ship…
The old man put down the stack of tickets, huffed in annoyance, and began to write in an open book to his right.
-Name
-José Menéndez Iribarne.
-From the whole family…
-Just my nephew and me. He's three months old, his name is Maximiliano Menéndez Iribarne.
He handed him the tickets with large, clear print. He told him the price. José paid.
-Luggage must be brought six hours in advance…
-I have nothing but a suitcase…
"I'm not interested in what he has, I didn't ask him that... The child shouldn't leave the cabin, those are the rules..."
"All right," said José. The old man's demeanor reminded him of someone, yet he couldn't quite place him. Could it be himself, perhaps, when he was old? The robust young man had succumbed to an apparent weakness of character that troubled him, but the old man offered him hope of soon regaining the security of his cunning.
He put the tickets away and when he turned around he forgot to ask the name of the ship. He was afraid of angering the old man again, but when he returned to the window, he saw that he was waiting for him with a mocking expression.
-I'm sorry to bother you again, but I forgot to ask you the name of the ship.
- Can't you read? It's written on the tickets.
José apologized for his clumsiness, stepped away from the window, and bumped into a woman who glared at him. He apologized again and decided to sit down and calm down. What was wrong with him? He looked like a

stupid novice, as if he were traveling for the first time. He, who had been a captain of merchant ships, who had practically sailed the world, and had sold weapons everywhere.

It was said that America was to blame, the unbearable climate of the coast, the unhealthy environment of the river, the flooding and the mosquitoes, the blows he had received from the women, and the shot of a shitty policeman.

He looked up at the approaching night sky. It was raining softly again, but the gentleness turned to harshness with its incessant repetition. He took out the tickets to read the ship's name. At first, he couldn't believe what he was reading.

“José Manuel De Goyena, Saturday, September 11, 9 a.m.”

She began to laugh, moving Maximiliano and waking him from the reverie he had fallen into on her chest.

"We're coming back," she told the boy. "We're going back to Spain. You'll see the life we'll have, my dear. We'll even travel on our ship, my dear, or as if it were ours because it has our names on it. Didn't Mama ever tell you that Goyena was a relative of ours? That's what she used to say, poor thing, when Papa wasn't home to nag her."

She had regained her confidence. She got up, grabbed her suitcase, and looked for a hotel. She walked many blocks until she found one she thought was suitable for them. It was two blocks from the rocky outcrop they called Sugarloaf Mountain.

-A room…

The janitor, neat and serious, looked at his dirty clothes and unshaven beard.

- Is the boy yours?

José felt his arrogance reborn.

"Of course! Do you know who I'm speaking to? Captain of the Spanish Navy, José Menéndez Iribarne." And he presented the papers that had been in a fold of the suitcase for so long, as long as he had been in America.

He was given a room with a splendid view of the bay. In the morning, he opened the window and let the landscape of the sea and the hills of the peninsula flood in with the light of the first clear day in a long time. He stretched with strength and energy. He dressed Maximiliano, who had slept next to him in bed, and they went down to breakfast.

He gave orders with a boastful air, because that too he had recovered. He ate and drank heartily, gave Maximiliano his bottle, aware that the women at the other tables were watching him curiously, and felt his pride growing. The men smiled at each other, disdainfully, but the women never stopped staring at him.

Then he got up, put the boy in his harness, and started walking down the street toward the hill. He asked if he could go up, and they told him they would take him. He paid, got into the cart being pulled by two Black men, and watched as the world expanded around him as he climbed.

At the summit, he paused to gaze. To one side, the land and the jungle, and far beyond, the river and all of old America. To the other, the sea, immense and endless, and he even imagined he could see the coast of Spain. He laughed at himself and saw that Maximilian was also looking out to sea and laughing.

He carried the cross in his pocket, the only symbol he would take with him from that land that had wronged him so much, and which had taken from him what was most precious. Spain awaited them, ready to receive them with an embrace as strong as death.

Belén de Escobar

October 2020 - June 2024

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